Phoenix Fire

by Chris_Quinton

Summary

Duncan MacLeod has been off the Watchers’ radar for five years. Methos isn’t concerned, but Joe Dawson has no intention of giving up on his missing Immortal.

Mac comes back, and he’s hunting, taking heads. Then the report goes up on the Watchers’ database – Duncan MacLeod is beheaded in Vienna, and it’s time for Death to buy back into the Game.

What Methos finds in Vienna sends him to the Normandy coast one step ahead of a determined killer, and tangles him, Amanda, Joe, and MacLeod in a carefully woven web. Throw in an empty house above a sea-locked bay, a vindictive immortal smuggler with anger issues, Duncan MacLeod’s code of honor, and let the pot simmer. In between times, Methos discovers that even after five thousand years, he still has things to learn about quickenings.

Notes

Phoenix Fire is set after the Highlander TV series, and follows on directly from the movie Highlander: Endgame. As far as I’m concerned, the second Highlander movie never happened, and neither did any of the ones after HL: Endgame.
Chapter 1

The cell phone rang, the sound almost lost in the hubbub of the airport's departure lounge. Impatiently Methos fished it out of his pocket, glared at the numbers on the screen. Joe Dawson. He sighed and put the phone to his ear. "Now what?"

"Mac's taken Connor's head." The shock and distress was clear in the Watcher's voice.

Nothing was permitted to show on Methos’ features. The only reaction was a moment of stillness. Then: "Connor could be a bit annoying," he said lightly. "And that old raincoat of his was decidedly suspect. Or did your boy have a better reason?"

"Who the hell knows? He's also taken Kell's."
"Ah," he said wisely, as if all was now clear.

"Shit, I still don't believe it!" Dawson groaned. "And I watched it happen! Something was going on between them--they were arguing--Mac didn't want any part of it, that was clear, but Connor was pushing it--Why would he? How could he--I keep telling myself it was a mistake--"

"Certainly was on Connor's part." Methos snorted. "I wouldn't care to cross swords with MacLeod on one of his good days. Took Kell as well, did he? Bet that quickening gave him a headache."

"You are a cynical asshole, you know that?" Dawson snarled.

"Joe, no doubt he had his reasons. Even if he didn't, it's what we do. So deal with it."

"Deal with it?" Dawson shouted, and with a pained expression Methos held the cell-phone away from his ear. "Is that all you can say? This is Mac we're talking about! And Connor!"

"If you felt that strongly about it, why didn't you stop them?" Methos demanded. "A bullet or three usually does the trick."

"You," Dawson said, his voice rough with grief, "are a shitty piece of work!" The connection was cut and Methos shrugged, slipped the phone back into the pocket of his long charcoal-grey coat.

"Deal with it," he said coldly.

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For more than thirty hours, Dawson searched for Duncan MacLeod, but found no trace of the man. Finally, his face nearly as grey as his hair and beard, physically and mentally exhausted, joints aching and prosthetic legs giving his thigh-stumps hell, he returned to his hotel. There he found a letter had been left for him. He waited until he was back in his room, then ripped open the envelope and unfolded the several sheets.

Mostly, it was a report. It might almost have come from his own report--an impersonal account of a duel and a quickening--of another challenge, another death and quickening.

Connor MacLeod defeated and killed by Duncan MacLeod.

Jacob Kell defeated and killed by Duncan MacLeod.

Hands shaking, Dawson sat at the small en suite bar and poured himself a whiskey. He knocked it back before going on to the rest of the letter. This was more personal, and filled in the gaps. He had only seen the arguments, not heard them. Now he was being told the 'why'.

' Connor was working on the theory that only the combined strength of the two of us could defeat Kell, and losing Rachel had wounded him badly. He wasn't much interested in going on. So I took his quickening.'

'Oh, God, Mac…." Dawson whispered. He poured another drink. The heartbreak woven between those five stark words was enough to choke him.

'Kell's quickening is being difficult, worse than Kronos' and Caspian's in its different way. Besides, there's a lot I have to come to terms with, and for my own sanity I've got to find some kind of
reason for this bloody madness immortals live by. Too often people I care about are being hurt and killed, and I don't know if I can take it anymore. I know, you've heard it all before, and I can almost hear Methos groaning in disgust. Whatever. If I ever get to the same state of mind Connor was in, I'll stick my neck on a railroad track before I put that kind of load on a friend.'

"MacLeod!"

'Nor will I give an enemy the satisfaction of removing my head. Sorry this is kind of disjointed, but that's the way I'm feeling right now. I'm taking Connor home, then I'm going to disappear for a while, but don't worry about me. Railroad tracks do not figure in any of my plans, long- or short-term.'

"So I should fuckin' hope!"

'I'll keep in touch with you, but I won't have a Watcher breathing down my neck, so please don't try to find me.'

"You won't what? You bastard!"

'Your friendship is something I value beyond any price. Take care of yourself.'

That was all. No signature, nothing. Dawson took another swallow of whiskey, trying to ignore the growing pain in his chest, and swore long and loud.

'Deal with it,' Methos had said. So Dawson did. He took no notice of the increasingly frequent chest-pains and shortness of breath, and booked a flight to Edinburgh. But he did not get a chance to board the plane.

"I'm what?" he shouted into the phone. "Damn it, Steve--"

"You heard me, Joe." The Coordinator's voice was implacable. "You're suspended, pending a disciplinary hearing. Murder, Joe. And consorting with immortals. Inappropriate Conduct. Again."

"It was self-defence!" Dawson snapped. His hand tightened on his cane until the knuckles showed white.

"One bullet is self-defence. More is murder, and whatever game plan he was running with the enforced Sanctuary and MacLeod, Matthew Hale had a wife and kids. Don't argue it, Dawson. You'll get your say at the hearing. Are you coming in on your own or do I have to send a squad after you?"

"Don't bother," Dawson snarled wearily. "I'm coming in. Just tell my replacement to keep well back. Mac's got an itchy spine when he's being shadowed."

"I'll do that. Sorry it has to be this way, Joe, but you've stepped way out of line."

"Had to be done. Mac was no volunteer, Steve. What Hale and his pals had done to him stank to high heaven."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures--"

"Yeah, my point exactly." He put the phone down. There was something else he could have said: that Kell had been an evil piece of work, and Mac had been overwhelmed once before. Would Kell
and his six hundred plus kills be too much for him to assimilate? Okay, there hadn't been any hint of it in that short letter, but Kell had also been damned clever, good at psychology; hell, he'd psyched out Connor MacLeod. Kell's quickening, his knowledge, was now lodged in Duncan MacLeod. But was Kell worse than Kronos? Caspian? He'd coped with those bastards without any obvious problems, but how about an accumulative effect? Fuck it, where was Methos when he needed him, needed to pick that five-thousand-year-old brain!

Dawson flew back to Paris on the first flight he could get, and was at once summoned to an initial hearing. Afterwards, Mitchell took him into his office and gestured him to a chair.

"Joe," he said, pouring whiskies for both of them, "I know you see them as friends, but you have to stay apart from them--"

"Contradiction in terms," Dawson said. "You don't stay apart from friends."

"Uh-uh. Your relationship with MacLeod and Pierson is the contradiction. I can understand it as far as Pierson is concerned; hell, the man was a Watcher, one of the best Researchers we had until Kalas killed him for the first time! But MacLeod--"

"Is valuable! They both are. Steve, little as it is, we've learned more about immortals and the quickening from what MacLeod's told me than the Society has managed to piece together in centuries! There's so much more--"

"Maybe. But I'll tell you straight out, Joe, murder charge aside, there's a small faction in the Watchers who've taken exception to your intervention in the attempt at setting up another Sanctuary. We're still debating putting together another--legitimate--one." He smiled bitterly. "But they're out for your head."

"Who?" Dawson leaned forward, fists clenched. "Not more like Horton? I thought we'd scoured that filth out of our ranks!"

"We have. But you're a loose cannon, Joe. That makes you dangerous. Some of us think it also makes you a valuable resource. Which is why I'll stall for what time I can give you, keep my eye on the more militant ones, and do my damnedest to haul your ass out of the shit again. And no, I'm not going to give you names. Yet. Just don't make it any harder for me. The suspension stands, of course, but you're not locked out. Good hunting."

"Not the best choice of words." Dawson grunted, and levered himself to his feet. "Thanks, Steve." He went back to his apartment above the Le Blues bar and booted up his computer.

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The replacement Watcher did not have much luck—or, in Dawson's opinion, was simply not good enough. After the brief sighting in Scotland, MacLeod might as well have been abducted by aliens.

Methos, too, appeared to have been inflicted with itchy feet. He'd returned to London, had immediately closed up his house and taken off for Venice. He never arrived there. Probably never even got on the damned plane, Dawson decided in disgust. He glared at the computer screen, at the image next to the sidebar that listed the details of one Adam Pierson. It was a lean face, pale and
enigmatic, with short-cut dark hair. Cool hazel eyes stared with supercilious detachment down an arrogant raptor's beak of a nose: Methos in his more acerbic aspect. 'Immortal', he read. 'First death, March 6th 1995, aged 28.'

"Yeah, right," Dawson muttered. Thanks mostly to his, Dawson's, continued Oath-breaking where certain people were concerned, the Society of Watchers didn't know everything about the immortals they Watched and profiled, and every so often his mind still had major trouble with the five thousand-plus years that this man had lived. "Methos, you ancient bastard, it's just as well I didn't need you as a witness for the defence."

He called up MacLeod's file, gazed morosely at his immortal's picture. It was a handsome face, and like the shot of Adam Pierson, was that of a man who could have been any age from mid-twenties to mid-thirties. In this case, deep brown eyes were set under rather heavy dark brows, and a windblown tangle of collar-length close-to-black hair made him look younger.

Dawson had Watched this immortal for over thirty years, at first with the impartial detachment demanded by his Watcher's Oath. Until MacLeod had confronted him at a time when the Society was being torn apart by a renegade faction led by Dawson's own brother-in-law, James Horton. A faction out to eliminate all immortals.

Then, when the dust had settled, Dawson had found he'd gained a friend. Since then, that friendship had grown on both sides, and now Dawson was missing the man as much as he would close kin.

So the search went on, and all the time that pain in Dawson's chest would not go away. He had a pretty damned good idea what his health problems were, but shunted them to one side. There were other matters for him to deal with. Like using the entire Watchers' resources to try to track down his missing friend. He, at least, had the advantage of knowing more about the man than anyone else in the organisation.

Methos was a good friend as well, despite their occasional verbal clashes, as close as MacLeod. Dawson didn't look for him. Methos had had many centuries to perfect his disappearing techniques; as Methos he was considered a myth and there were some who doubted he had ever existed, let alone survived so long. As Adam Pierson he was one of the few known immortals who didn't have an assigned Watcher, simply because no one could keep a tail on him. Dawson knew that sooner or later the man would decide to show up. Dawson had the uneasy feeling that MacLeod wasn't going to surface so readily.

And so the months dragged on, without any sign of either of Dawson's immortals. He was summoned to hearing after hearing, begrudging the time it meant away from the computer, until at last he sat in front of the Panel to hear the verdict.

"It is the considered opinion of this Panel," Mitchell announced, "that you used excessive violence in protecting your own life and preventing MacLeod's abduction, but that there were extenuating circumstances. The illegal setting up of an alternative Sanctuary and MacLeod's abduction was, in themselves, violations of the Watchers' credo. Your years of experience are too valuable to lose, so you are not barred from the Society. With immediate effect, you are posted to Research."

"No!" Dawson surged to his feet, his cane slamming down on the wide table between them. "I'm a field operative, damn it! Duncan MacLeod is my assigned--"

"Not any more." Mitchell's face was implacable.
"Then I lodge an appeal, here and now--"

"Denied," the Coordinator snapped, but Dawson did not hear. Agony lanced through him and he could not breathe—

Dawson was in the hospital for a month, during which time they discovered not only the extent of the damage to his heart, but also the cancer in his left lung. The prognosis was not good. He dealt with that, too, making an effort to stay out of smoky atmospheres—apart from Le Blues bar—and taking the medications as prescribed. The alcohol ban was another matter entirely.

Under pressure from his specialist, Dawson stopped pushing for an appeal and settled uneasily into Research, splitting his time between the department and the bar. To add insult to injury, arthritis was rapidly making his fingers too stiff and painful to play his guitar for any length of time. He no longer played on the small stage, but served behind the bar when he was not crouched over the computer in the back office or up in his apartment. Very few people were aware of the extent of Dawson's illness, and that was the way he wanted it to stay.

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Paris in springtime was legendary; in November the city was cold and dreary. But this wasn't a vacation. For Melissa Stone it was more in the nature of a business trip. She needed to see for herself, at the outset, some of the people she had read about and dreamed about for so long. Besides, she had not been able to get past the mutating firewalls around the Watchers' database for several months now, and she did not know if Duncan MacLeod had turned up. If he had, it was highly likely he would come here.

To be out of the bitter wind was a welcome relief, and the warmth of the dimly lit bar was even more so. It was early in the evening and the rush hadn't begun yet. She found a small table in a corner, and ordered coffee and a liqueur.

Melissa looked around her in the hope of seeing one or two familiar faces, but there was no one she recognised. She sighed philosophically. It was foolish to expect success on her first attempt. After all, finding Robert all those years ago had been pure serendipity, and she had not known at the time how useful he was going to be.

"My God," Matthew said, and laughed. "Mel-honey, come and take a look at this kid."

Melissa put down her book and rose to stand behind him, hands caressing his shoulders. He was checking through the latest sightings report. "That's Quinn Chrétien, isn't it?" she said, studying the image on the computer screen. She'd always had a knack of remembering faces and the names that went with them. It served her well in her PR career.

"Yeah, but it's the kid with him. Take a good look."

Obediently Mel leaned closer. Beside Chrétien stood a tall teenager with the gangly legginess of unfinished growth. Dark hair hung in an uncombed mess around a face that still had something of the softness of childhood, and so retained an androgynous beauty. "Well, he's drop-dead gorgeous," she agreed. "Give him another ten years, and--" Then she saw the likeness and in her mind she thinned the cheeks, defined the jaw and cheekbones, put fine laugh-lines at the corners of
the rich brown eyes. "Good grief," she gasped. "Duncan MacLeod."

"Could be the man's kid-brother," Matthew agreed. "Okay, after our chat last night on DNA, gene-pools and immortality, I'm one step closer to being convinced there might be a secret lab somewhere, complete with a Doctor X. Are you sure you don't want to be recruited into the Watchers?"

"I'm sure." She laughed, and kissed the top of his head. "Too many Oaths and restrictions for my taste. I'll just carry on playing around in their database."

"While you're doing it, find me a few more look-alikes, and I'll be even more convinced." He turned, wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face between her breasts. "Or we could go back to bed?" he suggested hopefully.

Melissa chuckled, stroked his hair. "Oh, no," she said with loving indulgence. "You have a wife and son to go home to. You're taking them to the Zoo today, remember?"

"I could cry off."

"You will not." There was a hint of steel in Melissa's usually warm contralto voice. "You know where your responsibilities lie, Matthew Hale. What we have is special and wonderful, but they come first. I told you that right at the start."

"Mel-honey, there just isn't anyone like you," Matthew sighed and sat back. "I love you."

"I know." She smiled. "Love you, too. You are my life."

For ten years that had not changed. She formed a vital, if illegal, part of his Watcher life and didn't begrudge the polyester-and-pearls wife who made a home for him and bore his children, and thought he was a security advisor. In Melissa's opinion, she had by far the better deal.

As well as the Watchers, Melissa also shared his conviction that the immortal Game must never be permitted to come to a conclusion, and that the Sanctuary was essential to that end. The Sanctuary, with its quota of immortals drugged and dreaming through their long years, insurance that no immortal would ever claim that unknown Prize. There could never be a final victor while it was functioning--but Jacob Kell and his coterie had raided the supposedly hidden base and killed all but one within.

So another had to be set up, and quickly, by roping in the first immortal Matthew's unofficial group could find, willing volunteer or not. That emergency required a swift response, especially with Kell collecting heads so quickly he was likely to trigger a Gathering. Ironically enough, it was Kell and his pack who presented them with that immortal; Duncan MacLeod, shot to death and impaled on broken metal. An offering to the Watchers' need.

But the new Sanctuary had been no more secure than its predecessor. In a matter of days someone had sprung MacLeod from the makeshift unit, and men had died. With the situation growing more desperate, it had been Matthew's idea to try for Kell himself, removing the cause and the effect with the one shot.

But Matthew was dead, had been for months now, and her last contact with him came in a too-brief phone call.

"Mel-honey, it's me. Can't talk for long, I'm on Kell's tail now and we're going to take him out." His voice was edgy, breathless as if he'd been running.
"Matthew, be careful!" she pleaded. "Kell is a psychopath! A killer!"

"Think I don't know that, sweetheart? Don't worry. I'm a sharpshooter, remember? Won't have to get close. Which is as well. Dawson has eyes in the back of his damned head, and he sticks to MacLeod like they were joined at the hip. Connor MacLeod's dead, by the way. It won't be up on the database yet, but Duncan topped him. Poor bastard didn't have much choice from where I was. Be interesting to see Dawson's take on it. Oh, shit. MacLeod's here!"

"Take them both," she said quickly. Faintly in the background she could hear the ringing clash of sword-blades. "Duncan would make good backup insurance, kept in a different place, and you may never get a better chance."

"Yeah, my thoughts, too. All I got to do is bypass both their Watchers. That isn't going to be easy, and I don't want to kill a Watcher unless I have to."

"You'll do what's right," Melissa said confidently, "the way you always do."

"Yeah. Honey, the pick-up team's in place and I've got to go. Talk to you later."

There had been no 'later'. For several days, Melissa had no idea what had happened, just suddenly found she could no longer access the database through his passwords. That had been chillingly ominous, and her foreboding had been proved right. A few hours of discreet watching had shown her a pale and tearful wife, stunned children, and family, friends and neighbors rallying round to give comfort and support.

Melissa had nothing and no one, no outlet for the grief that ate at her. Nothing to fill the empty void that now lived inside her. No one to offer support and caring. She lived in a maze, convoluted and stark. At the turn of every corner she expected to find her lover, but he was never there. Worse, she had to show a blandly smiling face to the world, to carry on as if nothing had happened, as if she hadn't lost the pivot her life turned about.

But a featureless image had begun to grow in the bleakness inside her, and the need to find the face that fit it had started to lessen the hollow ache of amputation. The best place to begin her search would be the Society of Watchers and their database.

Someone was going to pay. Someone was going to suffer the way she was suffering.

It took months for Melissa to find an expert who would teach her the ways of infiltrating firewalls, then she'd discovered him literally on her doorstep: next-door's high school kid delivering her newspaper. Drew had swallowed her cover story. He had been more than happy to show her how to test her firm's IT security, his teen-age ego boosted by her belief in his skills. Melissa had duly tested the firewalls, found them easy to breach, and made her report to the IT department. Then she'd started work on the Watchers' security. Somewhere there would be a report on Matthew's death and who had murdered him.

Getting into the database had been by no means so easy. But once in, she'd gleaned some useful information, if not what she specifically hoped for.

Matthew Hale; Watcher, deceased. Killed on duty while undertaking unauthorized actions.

Damn them for that! He was trying to do his duty, saving them and the rest of mortal-kind from the likes of Jacob Kell!
But his file was closed down, locked behind a screen she could not break through. So that last phone call from Matthew was all she had to go on: "Dawson has eyes in the back of his damned head, and he sticks to MacLeod like they were joined at the hip." Perhaps Dawson had seen something, knew something.

Joseph Dawson; Watcher, inactive. Transferred from Field to Research, based permanently in Paris. Disciplined for inappropriate conduct and excessive force. See also files on immortals Duncan MacLeod, Adam Pierson, Amanda Darieux. Inappropriate contacts still occurring.

Melissa had stared at the brief summary. Disciplined for inappropriate conduct and excessive force. What did that mean? Excessive force… Joseph Dawson, who had revealed the Watchers to his immortal, who had built a deep friendship with that immortal—deep enough to kill for? Matthew had told her he was sure it was Dawson and possibly Adam Pierson who’d freed MacLeod from their temporary Sanctuary. Someone had wielded MacLeod’s katana like an expert but it certainly wasn’t a man who, for whatever reason, relied on a cane to help him walk. She’d located the Conduct & Discipline files but failed to access them. Like Matthew’s, their security had been, and still was, beyond her skills.

Melissa had downloaded more files, read the 'Current Status' headings.

Duncan MacLeod; missing but believed active. Last seen in Edinburgh’s airport after burying Connor MacLeod. Watcher; none, assignment to be made when located. Previously Joseph Dawson, currently reassigned. Was in frequent contact with Joseph Dawson.

Amanda Darieux; active. Currently in Sydney, Australia, showing an interest in a museum display of jewelry from the time of the British Raj in India. Watcher; Hal Goldstein. Infrequent contact with Joseph Dawson.

Adam Pierson; missing but believed active. Last seen in New York in company with Joe Dawson, concurrently with MacLeod taking the heads of Connor MacLeod and Jacob Kell. Watcher; none, assignment to be made when located. Infrequent contact with Joseph Dawson.

Melissa had studied those last three summaries for a long time, putting the pieces together. Then another name had popped up in her memory and she searched it out, downloaded the files.

Quinn Chrétien; active. Currently living in Montreal, Canada, with wife Stacie and son Robert. Watcher; Connie Petros.

Next she had called up everything she had downloaded on Duncan MacLeod, read it through, over and over again until she knew every word, every image of the man, by heart.

Finally she'd pulled up Quinn Chrétien's full details. Connie hadn't added much since Melissa had last read the file. Quinn led a very quiet life that revolved around his wife and son. There were the occasional brief mentions of Robert's successes in Kendo and Tai Kwon Do, but no other pictures of the family. Connie had definitely not been doing her job properly. Matthew had been quite scathing about her, claiming the old girl should have retired years ago, but that might have been a little unfair. On the other hand, Connie's failings could well serve Melissa perfectly. For instance, at no point did Connie speculate that Robert might be a potential immortal. There was only one way to test that theory.

Melissa had sat for a long time staring at the single photo of the man's adopted son. Then she'd gone back into the database, into Quinn Chrétien's file, and deleted the picture of the boy. She needed Duncan MacLeod, who was nowhere to be found. But the boy would be the key to that particular mystery. Once she'd located Duncan, everything else would fall into place.
She had a goal, and the stages to reach that goal were now clear before her.

Over a period of time Melissa had planned it all out like a military operation. She had sold everything of value that she owed to fund that operation; house, apartment in Florida, car, shares, jewelry. Now, many months later, she was in Paris, a city she used to dream about visiting—without Matthew at her side.

Melissa took a sip of her liqueur. The bar was on the periphery of her vision, and she could watch it without moving her head. Even so, when the grey-haired, grey-bearded man appeared and began to replace a couple of nearly empty bottles of spirits behind the bar, she had to stop herself from turning to stare.

Joe Dawson looked old, despite the breadth of shoulder that spoke of strength, older than she had thought he would. The hands that adjusted the set of the bottles were swollen about the knuckles. Her own hands twinged in sympathy. Poor man. This cold, damp weather was not good for arthritis. She didn't suffer from it herself, yet, but her memories of her father's pain were still fresh. Joseph was moving awkwardly, too. She remembered Matthew had said the man walked with the aid of a cane, so he probably had it in knees and hips as well. He would be finding it a blessing in disguise that his immortal still hadn’t been sighted. At least he could keep civilised hours and stay out of the weather, instead of lurking around side alleys and doorways, shadowing dangerous men.

Still, Joseph called Duncan a friend, so perhaps he was missing the man. Covertly, she studied what she could see of his features. There was a grimness to the set of his mouth, partially hidden by his short beard, and his eyes were sad. Melissa nodded to herself. This was a lonely man. He poured himself a shot of whiskey, knocked it straight back, then moved down the bar to serve a couple who'd just come in.

Another man entered, and Melissa saw Dawson's face light up. He reached under the bar and produced a bottle of beer without waiting for the order and put it in front of the newcomer. He was tall, lean, and young, with short dark hair spiked with rain, a wonderful profile that belonged on an ancient coin, and he was not Duncan MacLeod.

Her memory supplied the name: Adam Pierson. Well, two out of four wasn't bad for a first time, and she smiled gently to herself.

The two men were talking, heads leaning towards each other with the bar between them, and Melissa wished she dared get closer so she could hear what they were saying. For a while their conversation seemed desultory, Adam's shoulders were relaxed and Joseph even smiled occasionally. But gradually tension began to grow between them. Finally, Adam stood back from the bar, and their exchange became heated, though they did not raise their voices. The young man banged his empty bottle onto the bar, turned and walked out, the skirts of his long dark gray coat swirling about him. Melissa didn’t have to hear Joseph's parting comment; she could lip-read it without a problem. Perhaps Joseph and Adam didn't have that close a friendship, after all. That was a shame. Poor Joseph.

Melissa stayed in the bar for another hour, knowing Adam wouldn’t return, but hoping others might appear. They didn't, so she took a taxi back to her hotel to get an early night. Tomorrow she would be flying out to rejoin Robert in Tunisia and they’d move on.

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To Dawson's intense relief, Methos returned to Paris, paid off one bar tab and opened up another. Dawson knew in his gut the immortal wouldn’t stay in the city for long. He refused to let that bother him, and shared a couple of shots of whiskey with Methos to underline it. Well, he drank whiskey, Methos stuck to beer, and Dawson made no mention of his hospital stay, or its results. Nor, with remarkable strength of will, did he immediately raise the subject right at the forefront of his mind.

He knew that damned letter off by heart, had spent far too long staring at the words. There had to be another meaning to them, a code of some kind, but in all the months, he hadn’t found it. Even after so many readings, the names sank into his heart like dull blades.

Connor MacLeod defeated and killed by Duncan MacLeod.

Jacob Kell defeated and killed by Duncan MacLeod.

But where the hell was Duncan MacLeod?

"Heard anything from MacLeod?" Methos asked idly, as if he had picked up on Dawson's thought.

"Not recently. Kuklinski maybe saw him in Budapest, but couldn't make a confirmation," he said. He topped up his whiskey glass, and put another beer in front of Methos.

The immortal shrugged. "Yeah, well, he wasn't likely to, if Mac doesn't want to be found," he said disinterestedly. "Looks like he's finally created a new ID for himself. He'll show up when he's ready, then sooner or later we'll go through the whole rigmarole again."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Damn it, Joe, you know what a pain in the arse he can be--a cross between a mother hen with straying chicks and a stubborn, argumentative, autocratic, arrogant, anal-retentive--"

"I knew it!" Dawson said triumphantly. "You're worried about him as well."

"I am not! The man is big enough and old enough to take care of himself!"

"Can't fool me, Methos," Dawson went on with a gravity in direct proportion to the amount of alcohol he'd drunk, "Y'know, we don't give the guy much of a chance, do we? We make fun of him, kick against his protectiveness, object when he makes decisions that effect us without consulting us, but that's what he was raised to do. Raised to be Chief, take care of his friends--clan. That's us, whether we like it or not. Clan."

"Chieftain, not Chief," Methos corrected him acidly, and took a drink from his bottle. "There is a difference. Sept, not clan. It's a matter of degree, and the Chief of the Clan MacLeod would have a lot to say about a rag-tag hill-farmer--"

"Okay, that was 400 years ago, give or take." Dawson wasn’t listening. "But lessons learned in childhood stick longest, right? Formative years. Anyhow. It's not just training with Mac. It's him. It's in his genes. He'd be the same if he was born at the bottom of the heap."

"Oh, really?" Methos drawled. "Are you saying he can't change? Even if he wanted to?"

"Well, yes," Joe said.
"Then he's dead," Methos snapped impatiently. "As in an ex-MacLeod. Gone to the Great Broch in the Sky. Retired Immortal. Headless." He slammed his empty beer bottle onto the bar. "Change is survival, Dawson! Cling to the past, repeat the mistakes over and over again--stagnation has a very sharp blade and absolutely no mercy!"

"Survival, huh?" Dawson hit back, stung. "How about living, old man?"

A cold and glittering gaze fixed on him, as implacable as granite. "Invented writing, wrote the scroll, the book, the screen-play. Oh, yes. And I've got the t-shirt."

The door did not slam behind him as he walked out.

Glumly Dawson poured himself another whiskey, and wondered if that was the last he'd see of Methos for yet more God-knows-how-many months.
Chapter 2

It wasn't the first time in MacLeod's life he'd taken an alias. But those other occasions had been rare and specific. He usually operated behind enemy lines, or under cover, for whatever reason. Never before had he used another name in what he saw as his normal life.

Normal.

Define normal.

He eluded his Watcher without compunction and to all intents and purposes, disappeared from the face of the earth. The katana that had become an intrinsic part of him since it had first come to his hand, was lodged in a Brussels bank vault, and he'd obtained a billhook along with a small selection of other woodworking implements. It had hurt to part with the weapon. The katana was a thing of beauty in itself, a true work of art that spoke to him in ways no other sword had done. Not even the heavy blade of the man he called Father.

On the other hand, the billhook was short, heavy, and would cut through bone as efficiently as it did wood. It was no weapon of grace, but was more easily carried and concealed – and more readily explainable than a katana. It could also, if necessary, be gotten rid of prior to any Customs check, and easily replaced. MacLeod was confident that his own skills would get him close enough to make the tool lethally effective should it be necessary. Besides, he could get a job anywhere as a carpenter, or, away from towns and cities, as a hedger, a field-worker.

The occasional brief and enigmatic messages sent to one Joe Dawson did nothing to lessen the self-imposed exile, but they did salve his conscience somewhat. Joe was a friend who'd risked life and remaining limbs for him in the past and didn't deserve to be kept entirely in the dark. Besides, he missed the man more than he'd thought possible. Dawson wasn't just a friend, he was family. The same went for Amanda, and in a strange way, even more so for Methos. MacLeod found himself missing not just the ancient immortal's company, but also the verbal sparring that was part and parcel of their friendship.

Seacouver, 1997

"You are so bloody predictable," Methos said mournfully, slouching against the bar. He shook his head and sighed, as if he was inspecting a disappointing end-of-term paper. "Oooh, look, it's November, so MacLeod's going to be in Paris or maybe Seacouver. It's spring so he'll be in Seacouver or maybe Paris. The only time you get out of your rut is when Amanda turns up, screws you senseless and drags you off with her on some idiotic escapade while your brain is too busy having fun between your legs."

"Mee-aow." Dawson snickered and gave a hoot of laughter, but the two men ignored him.

"Why are you complaining?" MacLeod grinned. "If you couldn't guess where I was at any given time, you'd have no one to freeload off whenever you felt like it."

Methos glared at him in mock irritation and drew himself up to his full height so that they matched each other inch for inch. "I," he said loftily, "am not likely to be hunting for your head. Yet."

"Very funny." MacLeod grinned. "You and whose army?"

"Don't tempt me!" Methos snorted. "You are easy meat, MacLeod, and don't you forget it!"
"Oh, yeah?" Eyes alight with amusement, MacLeod settled into relaxed readiness, poised for Methos' first move.

"Easy," Methos drawled, and took an imaginary gun out of his coat pocket. "Bang, you're dead, which gives me oh, about five minutes to remove your oh so decorative head from your shoulders. Rules, MacLeod. You follow them, I don't."

"That's cheating!" MacLeod protested hotly.

"Of course it is!" Methos laughed. "Like I said--too bloody predictable! You don't even change your name! You've been Duncan Bloody-MacLeod since 1592! Don't you think you should exercise a little imagination every now and then? Outside the bedroom, that is," he added with a snicker.

"Hah!" MacLeod's grin returned in full force. "You're jealous! Just because Amanda prefers tall dark and handsome to scrawny and--"

"I think this bar is gonna have to start supplying kitty-treats along with the pretzels," Dawson said appreciatively. "Now, girls, play nice."

"Scrawny!" It was a bellow of mingled outrage and laughter. "I'll have you know that sculptors have fought for my body!"

"Yeah, sure," MacLeod crowed. "Way back in BC something or other. Maybe Amanda is a little more discerning than Praxiteles. After all," he went on with a smirk, backing towards the door, "it's not what you've got, but what you can do with it."

"One day," he heard as he bolted out of the bar with his victory, "I'll show you what I can bloody-well do with it!"

The memory was bittersweet and MacLeod almost changed his mind. He had friends in plenty, but few as close as Joe, Amanda and Methos. Such friends were a rare and precious gift, too much so to be lightly put at risk.

In Budapest, MacLeod was Stefan Rakoski, shaggy-haired and bearded. For nearly a year he worked in a garage repairing farm machinery. Then a hunch and an itch between his shoulder blades told him the Watchers had pinpointed him as an immortal and he had a tail. Since he'd learned to trust his hunches over the span of his long life, he arranged an unfortunate accident involving an explosion and a fire that would have left little evidence of a body unless a sophisticated forensic team looked for it. Budapest was not inclined to waste resources on what was obviously an open-and-shut case of carelessness reaping its own reward.

For another year MacLeod was Lars Andersen on an oilrig in the North Sea, finding both anonymity and camaraderie in the close-knit community.

The next eighteen months he spent as Nico Ansari, a workman for a construction company in the outskirts of Barcelona. The beard was gone, but a moustache remained and his growing hair was tied at the nape of his neck in an untidy stub.

Then he became bearded Janos Miklos, a carpenter in Gdansk.

All of it hard physical labor that kept the body fit and fed while mind and heart struggled to find—something—a more personal identity, perhaps, that he could live with. And above all, a reason for the existence of immortals.
Paris, July 1815

The summer heat outside didn’t reach into the chamber and the air was blessedly cool, scented with incense. MacLeod, irked by the weight of the stone walls about him, paced with the restlessness of a caged animal.

"All the killing – I’m sick of it, Darius!" he burst out, rounding on the man kneeling on the prie-dieu in front of the small altar. "There has to be a reason!"

"Of course there is," came the mild reply. "In His infinite wisdom, He hasn’t seen fit to tell us. That’s all." He crossed himself and stood up, smiling at the younger man with deep affection. "Besides, it’s how we live our lives that’s the important thing, whether we are mortal or immortal. To do what is right, Duncan, that can be our only goal."

"Who’s right?" MacLeod demanded. "If neither Wellington nor Napoleon are right, what do I do?"

"Help the injured, comfort the dying, and give strength to the weak. Often, that’s by far the hardest road to walk. Killing is easy, Duncan," he continued, voice bleak, "especially for those of us who have a true gift with weapons. Dying is easy, too, when you know that within a short time you will live again."

"Aye, but it doesna stop it hurting," MacLeod grunted. "And it's noh so easy when the sword is descending on your neck. But it's all so--" He broke off, searching for words, unable to find them. "I cannae believe that we've been given our immortality on some blind chance, but that's how it looks to me!"

"Sometimes it does seem so," Darius conceded with a calmness that came close to infuriating MacLeod. "You're young, yet. In time, patience will come to you. Perhaps, too, you'll begin to understand something of the pattern."

"Pattern?" MacLeod pounced on the word. "What pattern?"

"For every force there is an equal and opposite force. Balance, Duncan, in all things. The brighter the light, the blacker the shadow: one cannot exist without the other. And that is the only answer I have found, the only one I can offer you. For the rest, I put my trust and faith in the Mortal who died on a cross."

"I cannae do that," MacLeod whispered. "I need a reason, Darius...."

"I know." The priest put strong arms around his shoulders, hugged him close. "Perhaps time is the greatest gift we’ve been given. We must use it in the best way we can."

It wasn't enough then, it wasn't enough nearly 200 years later. If Darius, that wisest, most compassionate of men, hadn’t been able to find reasons to give him, how could he hope to find them himself? For Darius, faith had been enough. That option was still not open for him.

Wounded beyond swift healing by Ahriman's first attack, MacLeod had thought he'd finally discovered who he was--what he was--the only answer that made sense of the nightmare that had wrapped itself around him. He was the Champion; forged, tempered and honed for one purpose, to defeat that ancient evil, and he hadn't expected to survive whether he'd won or lost.

He’d lived, but with his victory, he’d lost that anchor, and had to find it again. After giving himself over to non-being, returning to the world hadn’t been easy. It’d taken him a long time to come to terms with the fact that he needed to live in that world--therefore he needed to live the Way of the Sword. Or die.
Duncan MacLeod was by no means ready to die.

So he’d slowly taken up the threads of his old life, woven them into a pattern he could live with, and told himself he was over it. As long as he didn't think about Tessa's death, Darius' death, Richie's death, Ahriman, Kronos,…..

Joe Dawson was always there, a vital point of contact that somehow grounded him. Amanda came and went like an orbiting comet, and almost as predictable. Methos was never predictable. He showed up infrequently, and when he did, rarely stayed around more than a day or two. Long enough to clean him out of alcohol, clutter up the place and needle him with acerbic comments--and fixed him in the immortal world as Dawson did in the mortal. Connor--well, Connor had done what Connor did almost as well as Methos--disappeared a while ago. But gut instinct had told him that his kinsman was still alive. That same instinct assured him Amanda and Methos were still around and causing their own kind of chaos in the world.

Then O'Rourke had happened, and MacLeod discovered that his grasp on life was not as secure as he’d thought. He was weary. Tired of grief, of loss, of the meaninglessness of constantly watching out for challenges, of having to kill or be killed, for no sane reason that he could find. Weary of carrying the responsibility for others' safety, those few precious lives at risk merely because they were known to be close to him.

What was the point of it all? What difference did it make? Well, Fitz had shown him an answer of sorts for at least one of his questions. He had made a difference for the better, no matter how slight it may be in the overall scheme of things. To those who were important to him, the difference was not so small.

So he’d picked up the pieces, restored the pattern as best he could, and carried on. Amanda and Methos returned to their separate lives, impinging on his as little and as disruptively as before, and MacLeod was able to keep what he hoped would be a safe distance from them. Safe for them, that was.

And then Jacob Kell had arrived, Kate had walked back into his life, had died, and in a short space of time he’d taken the heads of both Connor and Kell. Connor's because the only other choice was to allow Connor to take his head, Kell's because for the first time in a long time, and justice aside, MacLeod hungered to kill.

Oh, he could make all the excuses he liked; the hunger wasn’t his, was a residual from Connor's quickening, but he knew the truth. To be born an immortal was to be born a killer. No matter how much it was sublimated or denied, nor how great or small the basic talent, an immortal was just that. He could spend days, years, contemplating his navel and acquiring Nirvana, but that changed nothing. Duncan MacLeod was a killer and he was very, very good at it.

But--why?

To what purpose?

There was, of course, no real answer to be found in instinct, in meditation, in ancient scrolls, beliefs or legends.

There was no Grand Design.

So MacLeod drifted from place to place, crossing borders as he pleased both legally and illegally, gradually letting acceptance of that fact settle at last into his soul. He was alive, and life was there to be lived. Somehow. Because when it came down to it, death was not an alternative he was
prepared to accept.

Five years of anonymity, of living day to day as someone other than himself had left an ache in MacLeod's soul.

Five years of isolation from those he called friends had made sure that ache never grew less.

But it had also been five years without the harsh frisson that heralded the approach of another of his kind, and that MacLeod counted as a blessing. It had gained him time for healing to begin, to come to terms with what he had--of necessity--done. He felt no guilt. Connor had made his choice and his reasons had had a certain logic to them. They’d also been familiar. Methos had said something similar to him soon after they'd first met; 'He can beat me. He might beat you. He can't beat both of us.'

Methos had ultimately been proved wrong. But Connor might have been right--that he, younger as he was and with less heads to his tally, would not have been able to defeat Jacob Kell without his kinsman's quickening to strengthen and guide. Might have been right, because Kell had fought with more than the blade in his hand. The man had used his quickening as a weapon, and that needed to be investigated. If Kell could do it, others could, so sooner or later MacLeod had to find a defence within his own quickening.

But there was one thing he knew deep in his gut; that if their positions had been reversed, if it had been his head struck from his shoulders and his quickening lodged in Connor, Connor would still have lost to Kell. Because Kell had defeated Connor MacLeod the day Kell destroyed Rachel Ellenstein.

So MacLeod had felt no guilt for his kinsman's death. What he had felt over and above the grief was rage.

That had cooled in time; now he felt only Connor's loss, the emptiness left by yet another death, this one of a man closer than any brother. The life-energy of a quickening was only a small part of the essence of an immortal's soul, and the sense that his kinsman was still a part of him had faded after a day or so. His world was lessened without a Connor MacLeod in it.

Now he was ready to start again. Build another life, but not in Paris and not in Seacouver. There were too many painful memories in both places. More to the point, he told himself, there were too many mortals who had known him and would wonder why he hadn’t changed if he went back to his old stamping ground just yet. Even if MacLeod cut his hair short again, kept the beard, there were those who'd recognise him far too easily. Give it another twenty, thirty years and he could reinvent himself, go back to Paris, one of the few cities that had truly become a home.

Over the handful of years, using the computer, that gift of the Gods to immortals seeking new identities, MacLeod had set up a net of alternative IDs and bank accounts that would have confused the most dedicated of searchers. Now he found the need to be himself. For good or ill, there was only one name that was his. So in London he shaved off the beard and moustache, considered cutting his hair short and decided against it. Like his name, long hair was one of the last few links to his early, pre-immortal, life, and he was reluctant to let it go.

He became his own nephew, Duncan MacLeod, of dual UK and USA nationality. Lastly he opened an account with a French bank, transferred a substantial amount into it and set up a couple of standing orders to keep it topped up. Then he caught a coach to Portsmouth and got on the overnight ferry to Cherbourg. There he bought a cheap second-hand Citroen and headed southwest, uncomfortable thoughts churning around in his head.
Did he still have the friends he'd abandoned five years ago? Did they still count themselves his friends, or had he walked out on them one time too many? One thing MacLeod had finally accepted over the last five years was that he had no right to make choices for other people, no matter how much he cared about them. For good or ill, the choice was theirs, to step back into his life accepting the risks that went with it, or not. If they did, then he would have to come to terms with the risks as well, that they could be hurt or killed or used as weapons against him--as he could be used against them. They were hostages to fortune, all of them.

Joe Dawson might understand why he'd left; the Watcher probably knew him better than he knew himself. He wouldn't embarrass Joe by saying so, but despite the vast disparity in their ages, he had come to look upon the man as not only a friend but also something close to surrogate kindred.

Amanda--well, who could predict what Amanda would do? Forgive him? Perhaps, if he groveled enough, begged enough, seduced her with love and laughter.

Methos. Something cold tightened in his chest. Joe and Amanda he'd almost taken for granted: Methos, never. MacLeod had welcomed the times he'd felt the grating Presence of an immortal and walked with sword in hand to find a long, lean body sprawled with careless grace on couch or bed or barstool. He'd welcomed the equally careless camaraderie that assumed acceptance and hospitality no matter the time or circumstance. They'd had their rough patches, of course, but somehow the abrasive tensions had eased away and the fractures in their relationship had been repaired.

He'd come to rely on that camaraderie, though MacLeod would sooner lie down in a pit of wall-to-wall scorpions before he let Methos know. He'd never been sure how Methos would react, if he learned of it. Probably would have disappeared so fast he'd left skid-marks and MacLeod wasn't prepared to take a chance on that.

But would Methos be inclined to take up their friendship where it had left off? He'd understand, almost certainly, but would he accept? The ancient immortal could be an intolerant bastard at times, and MacLeod had been on the receiving end of Methos' patented verbal flayings often enough in the past. He had a sick feeling it could well be irreparably broken, that it was one friendship he couldn't be sure of salvaging, regardless of the fact that Methos himself had raised the disappearing act to an art form.

Well, time would tell. Time, MacLeod thought bitterly, was one thing he had plenty of. But God, he missed them.
MacLeod's original intention was to take a leisurely drive along the coast and head for Brittany, but found himself seduced by the Normandy countryside. On impulse he left the D904 and followed narrow meandering roads through small villages locked in a time warp, a drowsy, peaceful land unscarred despite the terrible events of the last century. In the last hundred years alone, two wars and invasions had been fought over these fields, but now they seemed like figments of someone's overheated imagination. For a man who had some unpleasant memories of those wars and earlier ones, it was something of a tonic for raw nerves.

In no hurry to get anywhere, MacLeod bought bread, cheese and cider in the next village, and stopped a short way down the road to enjoy his impromptu picnic. The November weather was grey and cold, but from the naked trees in the orchard behind him came the overall impression of hibernation rather than desolation. He felt something inside him loosen, uncurl and expand, and when he drove on a slight smile lifted his mouth. There was also, for the first time in a long time, a growing sense of optimism in his heart.

A future waited out there, one that for him could extend many centuries--if he kept his head. Given the rate of change in the world over the last hundred years alone, that future was full of boundless possibilities. Literally boundless, because in another hundred years, how many planets would be within his reach? All he had to do was--MacLeod gave a hoot of self-mocking laughter, but the optimism didn't entirely fade.

By nightfall the rain had closed in. The nearest town was Surtainville on the coast, the nearest village was Flamanville and it was unlikely he'd find anywhere to stay the night closer than the town. But MacLeod knew from past experience that the concept of the British B&B hadn't taken a firm hold in some parts of rural France, and Normandy was no exception.

An enquiry at a garage on the edge of Flamanville got him a shrug and an expressive grimace. However, his fluent--if Parisian--French gained him the added information that a friend of a friend had a cousin whose grandparents might have a spare room to offer a stranger on a bad night. All it would take was a phone call, if M'sieur MacLeod would care to wait?

M'sieur was more than pleased, and half an hour later MacLeod pulled off the road into a farmyard a mile east of Flamanville.

All the downstairs windows glowed with light, showing the Dubosc farmhouse to be a half-timbered affair on raised stone foundations. At each end of the roof, massive chimney stacks reared black against the stormy sky, both putting out barely visible banners of smoke. The wide front door swung open to let out a bright swathe, a welcome sight through the driving rain, and a dark silhouette waved him inside.

MacLeod grabbed his suitcase and ran for the house.

"A wild night, M'sieur." the old man chuckled. "Go right in to the fire. I'm Gaspard Dubosc and this is Margot, my wife."

"Duncan MacLeod, M'sieur, m'dame, and I can't thank you enough for this--"

"Don't mention it, M'sieur," Margot Dubosc interrupted. She was a short, stocky woman in her seventies, white hair braided back in a severe coronet. Her face was strong-boned and had the remnants of a certain style, if not prettiness. "Sit," she commanded, "get warm."
In a matter of minutes he was ensconced in front of a huge old-fashioned kitchen range, being regaled with good coffee and a first class cassoulet, discussing international rugby with Gaspard Dubosc. Or rather, listening to his host discuss the sport.

This was no hardship. MacLeod knew the game, but the old man knew his subject inside out. All MacLeod needed to do was put in the odd question, make the occasional agreement, and he was brought up to date on the latest news on the upcoming Six Nations tournament, plus the respective merits of the various amateur teams in and around Flamanville. He was also able to pick up the local idioms and accent, and would gradually modify his own French. Paris was viewed with cynical and acerbic suspicion in the country regions, though as far as he personally was concerned, that was considerably offset by his foreign name and complete fluency in their language.

Even so, it would be well worth the effort to gain all the points he could with the Normans. And that was when MacLeod realised he had already made the decision to stay around for a while rather than move on to Brittany.

Though the choice might have been helped along by the home-distilled calvados, he was genuinely taken with the Duboscs. While her husband talked nothing but rugby, in between the lulls, Madame Dubosc told him that the family had lived over three hundred years in the same house, that they'd owned the land for nearly five hundred. That apart from a few head of milk-cows, an elderly carthorse, some chickens and a couple of pigs, the farm was mostly given over to apple orchards, and that her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were scattered along the west coast between Flamanville and Carteret, and as far a-field as Brittany and Canada. MacLeod congratulated her on her enterprising tribe, and said nothing about his own circumstances.

Halfway through the evening, one of their grandsons arrived, the phone-contact from the garage. Gervais was soaked to the skin and displayed a black eye as well as an arm in a sling. Injuries gained on the rugby field, MacLeod discovered. They were causing the younger Dubosc some severe problems. Not only did they interfere with his rugby right in the middle of the season, but it also meant he was a pair of hands short in the small boatyard he owned and ran in Surtainville.

Gervais was a young version of Gaspard and looked to be around MacLeod's apparent age. He was stocky, olive-skinned, had a broken nose--another token of his chosen sport--and an untidy shock of dark hair that curled onto his collar. He also possessed a wicked sense of humour, a charmingly irreverent view on life, except where rugby and boats were concerned, and the two men found an immediate rapport.

"I know something about boats and engines," MacLeod said. "In Paris, I lived on a barge for years. I had a mooring below Notre Dame."

"A barge." Gervais snorted, a grin widening. "That's not sailing! Until you've felt the surge of the waves under you, heard the sing of the lines, the creak of the canvas--"

"--Felt the smack of the boom on the back of your head because you didn't duck fast enough," MacLeod countered, chuckling. "I've sailed as well, single crewed and multi-crewed, and I know my way about engines. Especially old and temperamental ones," he added with a rueful smile and didn’t know that sorrow showed in his eyes. "If you want a spare pair of hands for a few days," he continued, "I'll be glad to help out. I've got nothing else to do with my time."

The offer had been made under the influence of good food and calvados, but it was immediately taken up. "Accepted," Gervais said at once, holding out his uninjured hand, and they shook on it. "I've got some good people working for me, you'll like them, and it's a great little yard. It was started in 1920, Grand-père's brother took it on after World War 2 and my dad refurbished it about 30 years ago, so it needs doing again. I took it on after he and Maman died, four years ago."
"You've got plans for it?"

"Pie-in-the-sky plans," Gervais said with a shrug and a self-deprecating laugh. "Purpose-built boathouse, work-shed, bigger office, a small dry-dock, up-to-date equipment, you name it; the list is pretty long. Still, in a year or so I'll see what I can do about re-mortgaging it and getting the cash together." He laughed again, with pride this time. "It says Dubosc and Son above the gate, and my little Philippe is boat-crazy. Admittedly, he's only six, but I'd like that sign to stay there just as it is."

"Well, I wish you luck," MacLeod said gravely, and raised his glass in a toast. "Dubosc and Son."

###

After the unexpected guest had been shown to the spare bedroom and left to settle down for what was left of the night, Margot Dubosc returned to the kitchen and sat at the table between her husband and grandson. She said nothing, but Gervais watched her with a certain wariness.

"Well?" he said eventually. "Grand-mère, are you going to lecture me again?"

"On what? Your foolishness in hiring a man you've just met? I suppose it's little different to you asking us to take in a stranger because it's a bad night out there and he had nowhere else to go." She smiled as she said it, and there was no sting to the words. "And us agreeing to it."

"He doesn't play rugby; point against him," Gaspard announced. "Didn't pretend just to be polite; point for him. Offered to pay for bed and board; point for. Didn't argue when I said no, and immediately offered to help out around the farm tomorrow; two big points for, though now he's got a job with you, he won't be able to do it. He's foreign; point against. Speaks French like a proper Frenchman and seems like he's doing his best to lose that bloody Paris accent: two big points for. He's respectful: another point. How are we doing so far?"

"Hah!" Margot snorted, and slapped her open palm on the table. "Points! Outward appearances are something any good actor can put on. Sometimes you have to go by your instincts. Especially these days. I like this Duncan MacLeod; he looks like kin. But you take care, Gervais. Madeleine won't thank you if you get yourself hurt or worse. It's enough that you break bones on the rugby field!"

"Why do you think I've sent her and Philippe to Rouen to stay with her sister for a while?" He put his good hand over hers and gently patted the arthritic fingers. "I'll be okay."

"You should talk to Roussel," Gaspard said, not for the first time.

"When I have something solid to give him," Gervais said, also not for the first time. "Suspicions aren't enough for the Police Judiciaire, and when André knew me, I was just one of his students."

"His best loosehead prop in the college team!" Gaspard snapped. "He won't have forgotten you, boy! He'll listen!"

"He isn't a college lecturer or a rugby coach any more, Grand-père. He's an Inspector in—"

"Exactly. You should talk to him, before someone gets hurt. Or killed. If it is drugs or illegal immigrants, either way the people doing it are going to be ruthless and dangerous."
"He's right," Margot said. "Don't forget you have a wife, a son, and a child on the way. Speak to André Roussel!"

"I will, as soon as I have something concrete to go on!" He got wearily to his feet. "I have to get to bed before I fall over, or Jean-Michel will be picking up a zombie tomorrow morning."

###

The pain of his broken arm and bruised eye made sure that Gervais had a bad night. He dragged himself down to the kitchen not long after dawn, to find his new employee already there. A quick raking glance and slight smile of sympathy got an answering smile from him as he eased himself into a chair. "You look pretty fit, Duncan," he said. "I meant to ask you last night, what sport do you play?"

MacLeod's shrug was pure Gallic. "I've played golf sometimes."

"Golf?" Gervais was scornful. "That's an old man's game. You'd do well on the field, I'd say. How about you, Grand-père?"

"Hmm." Gaspard took his pipe out of his mouth, looked MacLeod up and down as if he was bloodstock in the auction ring. "Got height. Good shoulders. Might make a fair winger, if he can jump. Training will give him the speed and strength, and he can learn to take the knocks."

MacLeod held up his hands, laughing. "Whoa, slow down! I'm a fully paid up member of the Cowards' Union!" He grinned. "You've only just hired me; now you want to cripple me?"

"Not until I've got my arm back." Gervais chuckled. "Everyone I know plays, or used to play, the game, Duncan. By the time we've finished with you, you'll either be a convert or heading for the horizon at the mention of the word."

"Enough!" Margot interrupted. "Look at the time! Jean-Michel will be here any minute and Gervais has had nothing! Not even coffee!"

Jean-Michel Bouvin arrived some five minutes later, and was in no hurry to leave quickly. He slouched in his chair in a way that reminded MacLeod of a distant friend and accepted a cup of coffee with smiling grace, dark eyes on the stranger. He was built along the same lines as Gervais: same height, same age, same coloring, and his tangle of dark hair was just long enough to be tied at the nape of his neck. He had a rugged handsomeness and a ready smile, both of which served him well with the female population of the area, MacLeod guessed, judging by the teasing comments from the Dubosc's.

Introductions were made and Jean-Michel didn't seem surprised to learn the foreigner-stranger was now a temporary part of the Dubosc & Son Boatyard. "Welcome aboard," he grinned, shaking MacLeod's hand. "What position do you play?"

"None!" MacLeod said quickly. "I don't play rugby."

"We're working on winger," from Gervais at the same time.

"Matthieu plays on the wing," Jean-Michel said, eying MacLeod much as the senior Dubosc had done. "He's my kid brother. You look a lot like him, as a matter of fact. A few years older, but
that's all. Do you have kin in Normandy?"

"No," MacLeod said. "Not as far as I know."

"Oh, well," Jean-Michel shrugged and smiled. "As far as being a winger is concerned, Matthieu can give you any tips you might need."

MacLeod smiled and said nothing. He'd met this kind of fanaticism before, and knew he might as well save his breath.

"This weekend we'll put you through your paces," Gervais said. "You'll soon--"

"Not this weekend," MacLeod cut in quickly. "I'm doing a couple of jobs in the south barn. I've already arranged it with Madame Dubosc."

"Grand-mère!" Gervais was outraged.

"The deal's done," she said crisply. "Now, go to work, all of you."

###

The weather was still storm-driven and wet, but Jean-Michel drove with the same careless insouciance he probably brought to everything he did, and made no allowances for the condition of the roads. If MacLeod had been subject to a permanent death from crash injuries, he might have been more concerned when Jean-Michel cheerfully informed him that this was a new car—well, not new, exactly, but recently bought—and that he'd written off three others in less than a year. As they'd just slid at speed down what was little better than a flooded farm track and aquaplaned round a corner to bounce off a bank, MacLeod had no difficulty in believing him.

Gervais, obviously hardened to his friend’s driving style, was braced securely in the front seat, knees up and feet planted solidly against the dashboard, smoking a cigarette. MacLeod refused an offered Galois, wedged himself with his legs against the back of the front seats, and enjoyed the wild ride.

They entered Surtainville at a more decorous speed, and Jean-Michel turned into the cobbled street leading to the boatyard. The gates already hung open, and a couple of other cars stood in front of a small clapboard office. Between them was a motorcycle under a tarp weighted down by concrete blocks. Through the office window MacLeod could see three men standing around with steaming mugs in their hands.

"Late again." Jean-Michel grinned. "What an example for a boss to set his trusty work-force."

"Shocking," Gervais agreed. "Duncan, come on in and meet the rest of the crew, then I'll show you what you're working on."

Yves Raoullin was the oldest, in his late fifties, clean-shaven and with close-cropped white hair. His hard, weather-beaten features were expressionless as he shook MacLeod's hand, and he said nothing beyond the few words of greeting.

"Damn," Thierry Pitou grunted. "We need another hooker. Welcome to the asylum, Duncan." He was in his forties, dark hair badger-streaked with white, trimmed beard and moustache still black. He was short but heavy with muscle, a bull-mastiff of a man. "Gervais, the Halcyon put in last night, left at first light. That's the fourth time running."

"Fine," Gervais said brightly. "We'll talk about it later. Duncan, this is Matthieu Bouvin."

"The real winger," MacLeod smiled. They shook hands and Matthieu smiled back. He was a tall man in his mid twenties, topping MacLeod by about an inch. Like MacLeod, he wore his long dark hair in a ponytail, but his heavy brows were straight, and his nose had been made aquiline by an old break. There was a certain similarity in their height and build, in their coloring and cast of features, but that was all. As a racial type though, all of them, including MacLeod, might have come from the same tribal line.

Matthieu grinned. "Glad to meet you," he said. "What club do you play for?"

MacLeod groaned.

###

Copious amounts of liquid detergent and a scrubbing brush got the oily dirt out of MacLeod's skin and fingernails, and he was whistling as he dried his hands. It had been a good day. The engine he'd been tasked to recondition was of a familiar type, and he'd been able to demonstrate that he knew what he was doing with it.

The Dubosc work-force had shown little in the way of reserve, with the exception of Yves, and all of them had made him feel welcome. They were easy-going and cheerful—again, except for Yves. Judging by the affectionate needling from Jean-Michel, Yves seemed to have a naturally taciturn nature, with no obvious surliness attached to it.

During their lunch break, all of them but the injured Gervais had spent half an hour on the nearby beach, jogging in a wide circle and tossing a rugby ball back and forth between them. At first they'd gone easy with MacLeod, but before long the pace had picked up and he was being fed high ball after high ball, forcing him to leap for the catches. Then Matthieu had started challenging him for those catches. In spite of the wet sand dragging at his feet and the skills of the taller man, MacLeod had managed to snare his fair share of the ball.

Panting and laughing, Jean-Michel had pounded him on the back. "Not bad," he'd grinned. "You've got good hands. But we don't play basketball. Next time, maybe we'll try it with tackles."

But there were under-currents that centered on the boat. The Halcyon had been briefly mentioned and quickly skated over. For a second all eyes had focussed on him: not in suspicion, exactly, but as an outsider. Whatever the problem, it was clearly none of his concern, and he had no urge to make it so. Then Madame Dubosc called him to the table for the evening meal, and he put the Halcyon right out of his thoughts.

Later that night, in the privacy of his bedroom, MacLeod sat down to write to Joe Dawson. This time the letter was a lot less cryptic, but paradoxically harder to write:
'I'm back in France and planning to stay. I'm in Surtainville, and I have a temporary job. When it finishes, I'll be moving on, probably to Brittany. As soon as I'm settled, I'll be in touch again. Maybe we can meet up somewhere--your choice.

Apart from the fact I owe you a long explanation, it would be good to talk. Though I'll understand if you decide against it.

Joe, I know I don't have the right to expect any favors, but I'm pretty sure I don't have a Watcher right now, and I'd be grateful if you could keep it that way for a while. Apart from yourself, of course. That's a given.'

There was more he wanted to say, but could not find the words. So he signed it 'Mac', folded it and shoved it in his coat pocket. Tomorrow he'd get an envelope from Gervais' office and post it. Maybe.
"Hi," said Methos, and Dawson nearly dropped the bottle he was replacing. "You want to be careful," the immortal said cheerfully. "That's good brandy, that is. Care to pour me a snifter while you're there?"

"What're you trying to do, give me heart failure?" Dawson snorted, and gave a bark of laughter. "Didn't expect you back."

Methos shrugged. He hadn't thought it was that funny. "Sticks and stones," he said, and hitched himself up onto a barstool to lean against the bar, one leg swinging idly. "And broken bones mend." There was no need for either of them to say more on the subject of yesterday's meeting. "I came in at lunchtime to have a drink. Etienne was saying you don't play anymore." He nodded towards the small stage.

"Yeah, well," Dawson said, with a shrug of his own. "You know how it is." He poured the brandy and put it in front of the immortal. "Gotta give some of these youngsters a chance."

"If you say so." Methos smiled. The distorted knuckles told their own story and he dropped the subject. He took a sip of the brandy and hummed appreciatively. "How's the research going?"

"Okay, I guess. Right up your street, in fact." He began to snicker. "I put in a request to be shunted onto the Methos team."

"You what?" Methos straightened out of his slouch.

"It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it."

"Team, you said."

"As in me and Colette Neumann. Remember her?"

"God, yes! Bless her dear old fuzzy heart, she used to feed me cookies and chocolate milk as if I was a six year old! But she was cataloguing Darius the last I heard. Hasn't she retired yet?"

"Next year, but they may well give her an extension. The old girl's still got a mind like a steel trap when it comes to archives. She talks about you a lot."

"Those were good days." Methos sighed. He'd enjoyed being in Research.

"Yeah," Dawson said, abruptly serious. "I've been wishing you were still there. We could do with some of your computer skills."

"Oh?" Methos subsided into his usual semi-feline sprawl. "Skills as in firewalls and hackers?" It wasn't a shot in the dark; he'd already discovered the increased security around the database.

Dawson nodded. "Someone's been getting through on an irregular basis. The Nerds Department have put up all kinds of tripwires, and lately it's kept him out. Nothing's corrupted, nothing's missing as far as we can tell, but data could have been downloaded before we were onto him, and we don't know what or when, or who by."

"That could be a problem," Methos said quietly. "Do you have any theories?"

"Yeah. Mac." Dawson poured himself a whiskey, topped up Methos' brandy. "He may not be in
your class, but he's no slouch on the keyboard. I think he's checking things out, laying low, using our Sighting Bulletins to steer clear of trouble."

"Maybe, but he hasn't before," Methos pointed out. "It's not his MO."

"People change," Dawson said, grimness in the rough tones. "Immortals change. Answer me truthfully, Methos. Do you know where he is?"

"No," he said. "I don't."

"But you knew where he was when he disappeared after Richie, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You tracked him down and left him to sort himself out, right?"

"Yes, but not this time. I haven't a clue where he is, Joe, and that's the truth. Not," Methos went on with a gleam of amusement in his narrowed eyes, "that you'd be able to tell if I am lying."

"Huh. Don't be so sure of that." Dawson paused. "There was an unconfirmed sighting in Algiers last week."

"I know, I saw it. The emphasis is on the unconfirmed, Joe."

"You don't think it was Mac?"

Methos shrugged. "It could well have been him. I just don't know, but I'm not haring off to Algiers to find out. He'll show up when he's ready."

"He sold the barge. Sold all his property except the island."

"Sold all the property you know about," Methos corrected him. "There could well be a considerable difference. MacLeod's pretty canny with his money. Give it and yourself a break, Joe. If I were you I'd be more worried about your Phantom Hacker. I'd like to know who he's interested in."

"Next time he gets in, they'll find out. If he gets in. The Nerds reckon they have the whole database sewn up tight. And that is not a challenge," he added quickly, as a slow grin lifted Methos' mouth.

"Spoilsport," the immortal said, drained his brandy and stood up. "I'm off. See you next year some time."

"Yeah, you take care."

"Always do." On his way to the door, Methos paused briefly to button his coat and meet the gaze of the bedraggled young woman sitting at a table near the entrance. "I'm leaving now," he said to her kindly. "I'm going to Orly airport. Would you like to share my taxi?"

She shook her head, exasperation in her eyes. He beamed at her, captured her hand and lifted it to his mouth, turning her wrist to kiss the Watcher tattoo there. "Have a nice day," he whispered, and left. She didn't follow him.
MacLeod's work on the engine the previous day had passed Yves' scrutiny. His work on the aged stand-by generator at the farm was just as successful. Gervais kept him company, handing him tools and parts as he needed them but clearly disgruntled that he had to sit on the sidelines.

"When does the cast come off?" MacLeod asked, accepting a gasket ring.

"The seventh. Next Wednesday," Gervais reached across and picked up a long screwdriver, slid the business end under the grubby cast on his arm and scratched. "Can't come soon enough for me," he sighed.

MacLeod smiled. "Shouldn't be too long before you're playing again. As long as you don't take any short cuts with your physiotherapy."

"Don't start," Gervais grumbled. "I get enough of that from Yves. He's the nearest we have to a coach, and he's a slave driver. Which I hope you'll soon find out," he added with a cheerful grin. "If you get a move on, we'll have time to get to the game before the kick-off. Grand-père said he'd wait for us."

"I don't know if I can make it, boss," MacLeod said earnestly. "M'sieur Dubosc wants me to take a look at the cider-press, and there's a leaking gutter over the--"

"Hah! Anyone would think you weren't interested in rugby. You don't fool me, Duncan MacLeod. I watched the way you'd grab that ball and run yesterday at lunchtime. You loved every minute of it, especially when Matthieu started challenging you for it. I have a feeling you're a natural. So does Yves."

"Uh, that's great, Gervais. I might well take you up on it, if I stay around."

"So why wouldn't you?"

"Well, I was originally heading for Brittany until your job offer. When your cast comes off, I'll be back on the road."

"You don't have to be," Gervais said. "There are other jobs going around Surtainville. Who knows what will turn up? In the meantime, tighten that last bolt, and let's go. Grand-père will be getting impatient. He hates to miss the kick-off."

They made the kick-off by a scant few minutes, mainly because Gaspard Dubosc was at the wheel and he seemed to have been the one who taught Jean-Michel his driving style.

The Flamanville team was playing an old rival, Bréval, and MacLeod spent the rest of the morning with the two Dubosc, shouting insults and suggestions from the sidelines, along with fifty or so enthusiasts. The rain stayed away, the field was a sea of mud and the two sets of team colours were indistinguishable within minutes. It was the best time MacLeod had had in a handful of years. Afterwards, he was introduced to the rest of the Flamanville team. At the same time he discovered that Yves had roughed out a training schedule for him, and was aiming to get him into the team in a matter of weeks. He reminded the man that he was only staying round for a while, until Gervais didn't need another pair of hands, but Yves wasn't listening.

###
Monday morning, MacLeod went back to his work on the engine. The letter to Joe Dawson didn’t get posted, but stayed in his jacket pocket. He knew it was sheer cowardice on his part, an unwillingness to face the reality of an irrevocable break with a good friend. Later, he told himself, when he was settled somewhere. Then he wouldn't need to write, he could go to Paris and walk into Le Blues bar, give Dawson a personal invite to visit his new home. Wherever that was.

Life settled into an easy routine. Jean-Michel picked up Gervais and MacLeod in the mornings and drove them to Surtainville. MacLeod, as the newest member of the workforce, was delegated to collect fresh baguettes and lunch-snacks from various shops round the town, and to make the coffee at regular intervals during the day.

The lunchtime workouts on the beach were another regular feature, and the weather had to be more than moderately appalling before they were cancelled.

MacLeod's evenings were usually spent either in the bar of Le Sémaphore on the cliff edge west of Flamanville, or in La Fontaine, a small wine-bar in Surtainville, along with Gervais and the Bouvin brothers. Usually, some or all of the team turned up, along with assorted wives, girlfriends and the occasional daughter, and MacLeod was taken into their close-knit clan without question or reserve. Not since his days with the Lakota Sioux had he been so accepted.

All in all, MacLeod acknowledged he was happy and content. Life was comfortable, uncomplicated, and he was in no hurry to move on.

###

"Have you thought," said Jean-Michel, "that maybe our friend is not what he seems?"

Gervais stared at him. "Who? Duncan? What would he be?"

Jean-Michel sighed and shrugged. "Think about it. We have our problems and our suspicions, yes? We've been watching certain people, certain boats. And then along comes this man who I would have sworn was Parisian in spite of his name. Now, a matter of days later, he speaks with a Normandy accent as if he was born and bred here."

"He's good with languages," Gervais said. "Told me he speaks Italian and German, too. He isn't part of it. Whatever it is."

"You can't be sure of that!" Jean-Michel's voice dropped to a whisper. "What if they've found out we're keeping an eye on them? They could have sent him to infiltrate us--he could be dangerous."

"Hah!" Gervais snorted. "Some spy--so subtle he calls himself by a foreign name and speaks better French than you do. Me, I think it's to his credit. More to the point, so does Grand-mère Margot, and she isn't easily fooled. She likes him, feels sorry for him. Says there's a deep sadness in him, whatever that means. You want to tell her you don't trust Duncan?"

Jean-Michel visibly paled. "Don't be crazy! I don't want her clouting me round the ears again! Besides, I like him, too. I really do. He's got a great sense of humour, works hard, always ready to help out, stands his rounds at the bar and all that. But I still think he needs watching."
"Okay, you watch him. But don't blame me if he catches you at it and you end up with bruises. Duncan moves like he knows how to handle trouble."

"Yeah?" Jean-Michel jeered in his version of an American accent.

"Yes." Gervais grinned. "He reminds me of André Roussel."

"Shit, yes! You're right, he does!" Jean-Michel shook his head disgustedly. "I spent more time flat on my back trying to breathe, than learning karate!"

"Well, you would talk back at him. No one smart-mouths their Sensei."

"Maybe if Duncan turns out to be that good at it," Jean-Michel did a typical about-face, "we should recruit him. Sound him out first," he amended, "in case he is one of the crooks. Then recruit him if he isn't."

"If they're crooks."

"Of course they are! Drug-smugglers! I'll wager a thousand euros--"

"You don't have a thousand!" Gervais laughed. "I don't pay you that well! But you can set your mind at rest. My cast comes off tomorrow, and I'm going to offer Duncan a permanent job."

"Good. But what are you going to tell him about the Halcyon and Henri?"

"Nothing. There's no reason for him to be involved."

Jean-Michel shrugged. "It's your call, Boss, but it might be a mistake to keep him in the dark. Me, I wouldn't like any nasty surprises, and Carston just might pull one on us."

"Not necessarily," Gervais said. "It's hardly fair to hire him in one breath and in the next tell him we're maybe having a problem with smugglers. No. He stays out of it."

###

MacLeod sat cross-legged on the lat boulder, the chill sea-wind a solid pressure on his skin, tugging through his hair with cold fingers. Far below him the susurration of waves on rocks pulsed like the heartbeat of the world, resonating deep in his body.

He was facing west, looking out beyond the British Channel Islands towards the open Atlantic—not that much of anything could be seen on a murky night like this one.

Cap de Flamanville.

The nearest village was Flamanville itself, less than a mile inland. Over to his right was Le Sémaphore, a very good restaurant and bar perched on the edge of the cliff. To his left, on a higher jut of granite, was an apparently empty house with whitewashed walls, shuttered windows, and on the flat roof behind a parapet, three large facetted skylights. Someone's summer home, probably. This wild promontory wouldn’t be to everyone's taste in the middle of winter.

It was very much to his taste. Granite, heather, bracken, gorse, and fog; it reminded him of the slopes around Glenfinnan and the long grey spear of water of the loch. It also spoke to him the way
his island did, a rightness in his soul that said home and sanctuary and peace. And the sea moved its tides through his blood, claiming--

"Duncan?" A shout from the Sémaphore road, and Gervais jogged towards him. "Are you mad? You want to sit out here freezing your balls off when there's a warm bar and cold beer just over there?"

"You're early," MacLeod smiled, flowing easily to his feet.

Gervais shook his head in admiration. "I wish I knew how you did that," he grumbled. "Too many Hong Kong movies? Double-jointed?"

"Years of practice," MacLeod laughed.

"And the rest." Gervais fished a packet of Galois out of his pocket, turned away to gain enough shelter to light the cigarette. "My old karate teacher could do that, sit in full lotus. Made my balls hurt to see it. D'you do karate?"

"Yes."

"Cool." Gervais sucked smoke into his lungs. "I haven't done any for years. Not that I was much good at it. When I was in college, my dad said I couldn't do both. So I chose rugby."

"I've watched the team play. You should have taken up both, you'd find martial arts useful in the scrum."

"Meaning we need all the help we can get?" Gervais grunted. "You're probably right. It might have saved me from breaking my arm if I'd chopped at Pierre's balls. Talking of which, for once I didn't have to wait at the hospital. The cast came off, I have my arm back even if I do have to have physio for a while, and you still have a job if you want it. How about it, my friend?"

MacLeod didn't have to think long and hard; he didn't need a job, but it wasn't in his nature to sit and do nothing with his life. Besides, he liked the Dubosc family and the people he worked with at the boatyard, and he enjoyed the work itself. It'd be good to stay a while longer. Brittany would still be there if he changed his mind. "Yes," he said. "I want it. Thanks."

Solemnly the two men shook hands, and then Gervais pulled him into a spontaneous hug. "Fantastic!" he grinned. "Now we go to Le Sémaphore to celebrate, yes?"

###

Later that night, MacLeod lit two candles and folded into lotus on his bedroom floor. His decision had been the right one, he was bone-deep certain of it. He could make a good life for a while in this part of Normandy, but there was still the Game. Merely because he wanted no part of it didn't mean that it wouldn’t come to him.

His katana, so much a part of him that even after five years it felt wrong not to have it within easy reach, still lay secure in that Brussels bank vault. When he had a place of his own, he would go and collect it. In the meantime, he’d carry on as he had since he’d stored it there. He didn’t need the sword to defend his head; the billhook was more than adequate. But while he knew he’d kill without compunction if pushed to it, he had no intention of letting things get that far. An immortal bent on taking his head would probably not be reasoned out of it, so he would find another way to discourage any attacker.

Perhaps Jacob Kell had something to teach him there. The way that man had used his quickening
was surely an extreme version of the tricks he and Amanda used to play on each other while they were with Barnum & Bailey's Circus. Which reminded him of Darius, and the expression on the priest's face sixty-odd years ago when MacLeod had mentioned them in passing. It was just a casual remark, and Darius had thrown up his hands in exasperation. "All that time I spent trying to teach you to be aware of your quickening and you treat it like a--a toy?"

Paris, December 1816

"Can't you sit still for even five minutes?" Darius demanded. "How do you expect to listen to yourself, reach into yourself, if you cannot find stillness?"

"I'm cold," MacLeod said stubbornly. "I havena been warm since I cannnae remember when."

"And you've never known that before?" Darius snorted. "Tell me, how cold was Glenfinnan in winter?"

"Colder, but I dinna have to like it."

"And when you were hunting, how long could you stay still in all that coldness?"

"As long as I had to--but that was different!"

"Is it? You are still hunting, Duncan. But now your quarry is your own quickening. Track it down, study it, learn it."

That gave the lesson a different slant, and this time MacLeod sank deeper into the semi-trance. He no longer tried to lose touch with his surroundings and look inward, but to do what he did on the hunt; open up his senses, become more aware, to see more clearly.

Gradually Darius gained a bright silhouette edged in blue-white light, a light that diffused through the room and engulfed MacLeod himself. That was a quickening? That was the aura that resonated on the edge of pain whenever he encountered it in another? So what did his own look like? He stared down at his hands, saw the same bright outline, but that was all. Darius swamped all else.

"Do you see?" The priest's voice was no more than a whisper at a distance.

"Yes."

"Lift your hands, hold them apart a little way, and will the quickening to go from one hand to the other." He obeyed, moving slowly, as if caught in a dream. But nothing happened. He concentrated harder. If Darius wanted it done, then it had to be possible. Then it seemed to him that a pale mist was beginning to gather between his palms, but it could as easily be his imagination.

"I cannnae," he said.

"Oh, but you can," Darius laughed. "You have quite a potential, Duncan, but like any other muscle, it requires both use and practice to gain strength and skill."

Needless to say, he'd done neither, until he and Amanda were travelling with the circus. She had used her quickening to tip him off-balance while he was practicing a handstand on horseback, an unseen shove that sent him sprawling and winded into the sawdust. Being Amanda, she had made his life hell until, in sheer self-defence, he had finally managed to nudge her from her tightrope.

They'd played that trick on each other repeatedly, until MacLeod found it as easy to do as a physical push. Too easy, for Amanda's taste, and she'd soon grown tired of that particular sport.
It had never occurred to him that it might be the same thing Darius had been trying to teach him. Until now.

In the dimly lit privacy of his bedroom at the Dubosc farmhouse, MacLeod knew a moment of uncertainty. It had been a very long time since he'd looked for his own quickening. Even while seeking for a way to defeat Ahriman, he hadn’t thought of it. But back then, Jacob Kell had yet to use the invisible lash of will power against him.

Tranquil and controlled, MacLeod put the memory aside. It had happened, it was part of him, and could no longer touch him.

Awareness of Self widened and he sank into it. There was no denial, no wish to lose personal identity in the greater whole, merely to be Self. Time had no meaning, he simply was, one with life, but still himself. This was something Connor had tried to teach him and had failed. Now he felt the earth breathe, felt the sleeping orchards beyond his window, felt the sea pulsing against the great cliffs, the steady life-surge of the tides. He lifted his hands; saw the wildfire that was his quickening as a glittering, eye-searing brightness. He saw the spectral light spreading out from himself as a dense mist. He was the centre and source of a vortex that curled out through the house and a little way beyond. When he concentrated on it, he was aware of it extending as a sphere rather than a linear thing.

What is the quickening? Connor hadn’t been able to explain it. Neither had Methos, Darius, nor Joe Dawson and the Watcher resources. The strength of it seemed to vary little from immortal to immortal. Regardless of age or the number of quickenings taken, each one alike in everything except that small varying degree of discomfort.

Kronos and Caspian had been over three thousand years old; while they were alive, their presence hadn’t felt that much stronger than Connor’s.

Jacob Kell, though, was a different matter. The power that man had generated was a palpable thing, almost an entity in its own right. And Kell had somehow used his quickening as another weapon. But he had a total of 666 immortal deaths to his credit, according to the Watchers. An emotive number in itself. Had those quickenings been the source of his incredible energy?

In death, the quickenings of first Caspian, and then Kronos, had crashed through him in a riptide of ecstatic agony overlaid with fleeting impressions. Kronos’ quickening had invaded him in a crushing deluge of rage, hate and a devouring lust that roused every instinct in MacLeod to instant combat. But only the fact that Kronos had attacked on two fronts had saved him from being swamped by the Horseman. For whatever reason, that ravening force had divided itself between himself and Methos, linking them momentarily in a strange gestalt.

Kell's incandescence was like nothing he'd ever encountered before, and there had been one long heart-stopping moment when he hadn’t been sure he was going to survive it.

Then there was Methos, whose resonance was insidious and painful, rather than overwhelmingly strong. Whose resonance he had gradually come to recognise on a gut-instinct level ever since Bordeaux: polar ice, cool silk, and blades so sharp they could draw blood from the wind and wound the soul. Dissonant as Methos' quickening was, it didn’t have the crushing weight Kell had possessed. Was that because Methos hadn’t taken over six hundred immortals, which seemed unlikely in a lifespan so long, or because the old bastard could lessen it somehow? How did you change a quickening? Was it even possible?

Eyes closed, MacLeod reached out, found the filmy edge of his quickening and tried to draw it in. It thinned, became almost invisible, but stayed where it was. His head, though, began to pound with
an agony that increased with every beat of his pulse. He didn’t fight the pain, but let it wash over and through him, and slowly the aura around him began to dim.

A deep instinct called *enough*, and MacLeod eased out of the trance to find dawn lightening the room and the candles burned down to stubs. He was exhausted, ached in every muscle, but felt a certain amount of elation. He was on the right track, he was sure of it and he intended to set aside some time every evening to practice. If he could learn to draw in his quickening to a dense core of power, perhaps it could deflect an attack if another like Kell confronted him. Using it as a weapon, though, was a route he wasn’t so sure about.

###

Chatting with Marcel in the boulangerie, fresh bread hot under his arm, croissants bagged in one hand, tartlets for Margot Dubosc in the other, MacLeod acknowledged a moment of deep content. The weather was cold and bright, later in the morning he would be helping Gervais crew a yacht from the boatyard to Goury, and right then he couldn't think of anything he'd rather be doing with his life. He was even beginning to develop a taste for rugby. It couldn't last, he knew. It was surely only a matter of time before the reality of his world caught up with him, but he was determined to enjoy this for as long as he could. What he would do when the Watchers or another immortal caught up with him, he wasn't entirely sure. He'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

MacLeod left the boulangerie and crossed the street, the smell of fresh bread still hot from the oven rich in his nostrils. The weekend was coming up, and he was tempted to give in to Yves' demands that he start training with the Flamanville team. Since he was going to be staying around for the foreseeable future, there was no reason why he shouldn't. He enjoyed the camaraderie, enjoyed watching the game, so why not go for it? He had nothing to lose, after all.

He paused by an estate agent's window. That was something else he should do; find a place of his own to rent for however long he'd be in the area. But first things first. There was a boat to crew up the coast to Goury.

###

Methos didn't go to Algiers. For a moment he was tempted to change his flight, but crushed the impulse. He had his own reasons to be convinced that MacLeod was alive and well, and saw no point in bolting halfway round the planet on the off-chance the idiot had forgotten his handkerchief and needed help wiping his nose. The Phantom Hacker, on the other hand, was another matter entirely.

People who routinely hacked into the Watchers' database could only be looking for one thing: an immortal, either a young and unwary one, or perhaps an old and unwary one. So said Phantom Hacker was probably an immortal himself. Or herself. A good reason for a very old immortal to disappear without trace for a while, even if the Watchers had no idea of his true age. Someone might decide he was vulnerable because of his apparent youth and try for his head. Methos preferred to avoid that. Killing was a problem for him; he was too damned good at it, enjoyed the dark rush too much, a rush that had nothing to do with the wild quickening ride, and everything to
do with--abruptly Kronos' voice was in his head.

"The freedom! The power! Riding out of the sun knowing that you're the most terrifying thing that they've ever seen. Knowing that their weapons and their gods are useless against you, that you're the last thing they'll ever see. That's what you're meant to be, Methos!"

The response the memory triggered was the same as it had been--an ice-cold hunger for that freedom and power, a need that was almost sexual. The old winter-fury ripped through him, raging at the futility and fragility of life, bringing with it the need to destroy every barrier Fate put in front of him. Daring the Gods, if they existed, to stand before him and prove themselves, because he was Death, and even Gods could die….

Kronos had fed on that, had augmented it in a way no other had done, before or since.

Bordeaux, 1997

The man's voice and devouring need worked its ancient spell and fuelled the surge of dark pleasure. Fuelled as well the growing rage; that time was past, had no relevance now, but more importantly, Kronos was threatening all that he held dear in this life. He threw back his head, loosened the reins on his fury and let it run free, knowing how Kronos would relish it, would think he'd won and couldn't know that all of Methos' hunger to kill, all the love-hate was directed specifically at him. "Don't fight it," Kronos purred. "Feel it." Oh, Methos felt it, felt it and reveled in it--

"You know that Cassandra was there," Kronos said and it brought Methos back to earth with a jolt.

"We didn't exactly exchange gifts," he said.

"You know that she'll kill you if she gets the chance." Methos made a slight movement that might have been a nod. "You never could bring yourself to take her head, could you? So I'm going to do it for you."

Methos' expression was wry. "And in return?"

"You kill Duncan MacLeod." Somehow, Methos hadn't expected that, and it shook him to the core.

"But he's my friend." And knew it was a mistake as soon as the words had been spoken. "He's nothing to you. Why?"

"Why? Because he's your friend!" Kronos' anger began to show. "Because you still have to prove yourself!" Then it became a shout of jealous resentment. "Because you owe me!" He lifted his knife and slashed his palm, then offered the hilt to Methos. "Now swear." Slowly Methos took the knife. "Swear you will kill MacLeod!"

Methos' grip tightened on the hilt and the point rose a fraction towards Kronos' face. Kronos looked at it, then lifted his eyes and stared at Methos, a small, knowing smile curling the corners of his mouth. Methos had no choice. He tore his gaze away and drew the blade across his palm, welcoming the bright, cold pain, and watched the blood follow. Then their bleeding hands came together in a hard clasp. "I swear," he said. He knew what was coming--the electric frisson that lifted pain over the edge into sexual pleasure as the fine filaments of their quickenings healed their wounds, jarred against each other and were forced into a temporary merger. He let it happen, let it flood into the chill fire of his rage and only dimly heard Kronos' triumphant laughter.

Yes, well, that was then, this was now, and Methos really needed to be on a plane out of there. He
also took extra care to make sure he wasn't followed on his way to the airport. Paranoia was a useful survival trait.

But unwelcome memories had awakened and as the passenger jet climbed to its cruising altitude, Methos found Kronos in his thoughts. It wasn’t comfortable. The man belonged in a part of his life that had long been put behind him and he had no wish to revisit it.

Kronos had been a primal force, vibrant with life in pursuit of death, glorying in destruction. There had always been a terrible innocence about the man, a dark and brilliant charisma that pulled people to him. Had pulled Methos to him, and kept him there at Kronos' right hand for centuries, because Kronos had given him the means to inflict his own kind of devastation on a wider scale than before. First the two of them, then three, then four.

Four horsemen. Methos shivered and stared resolutely out of the window. Three of them were dead. Death lived. "The times were different," he'd said. "I was different." But he knew he wasn't. He regretted much of what he had done, had spent centuries making some kind of atonement, but that essential part of him hadn’t changed. It never would. All he could do was contain the demon within and avoid people with long, sharp, pointed weapons. Well, most of the time.

Yes. When it came down to it, he was what Duncan MacLeod was not. A predator, perhaps the ultimate Predator. After all, no one escapes Death, not even immortals. He smiled bleakly. Not even Kronos. But who will come for Death's head?

The smile became a baring of sharp teeth. No matter who came for his head, they wouldn't get it, not even if they were the last two standing and the Prize was there for the taking. Because whatever the damn thing was, he didn't want anything to do with it, but neither did he want anyone else to have it. If he could ram a spike into that particular Wheel of Fortune, he would, in an instant. A double handful of spikes, and Fate could pick the splinters out of it for the rest of eternity.

The Game. Fuck the Game and its unknown Prize. No one and nothing was going to dictate to him what path he would walk, what trail he would hunt.

"Ego sum. I am," he said. "I will be."
Chapter 5

Gervais looked around, immense satisfaction in his heart. Firecrest moved sweet as honey under the one sail, MacLeod was a quietly competent crew and obviously enjoying this as much as Gervais himself. The sun glittered dazzlingly bright on the crests of the heavy swell. They were running north along the coast with the granite heights of the Cap de Flamanville on their starboard side, and a strong wind filling the canvas. Could life get much better? He thought about that for a moment, grinning.

"Hey," he called, and MacLeod glanced up. "Want to go below and fix us both some coffee?"

"Aye-aye, Cap'n Hook." MacLeod started to make his way aft, unclipping his line.

Gervais gave a derisive hoot of laughter. "Does that make you Peter Pan or Wen – " Something struck the tiller, shattering it just behind Gervais' fingers, driving wooden shards into his hand and arm. Four things happened simultaneously and in slow motion: he yelled in shock, the yacht veered athwart the wind as the rudder was released, MacLeod spun round and the boom swung across.

MacLeod tried to throw himself out of the way, but Gervais watched in horror as it hit the man in the face, sending him flying over the rail and into the water. It had taken only a matter of seconds, and Gervais was already reaching for the lines, hauling down the sail as fast as he could.

The yacht lost way and wallowed broadside to the wind. "Duncan!" Gervais yelled. "Duncan!" He clipped a longer line to his belt and climbed on top of the cabin to get a better view of the sea around him. They were both wearing wetsuits under their waterproofs and lifejackets as a matter of course, but the sea was bitterly cold, and the man had almost certainly been knocked unconscious. "Duncan!"

Gervais began to swear in a steady stream. As the Firecrest rose on the wave, the bright yellow back of MacLeod's lifejacket appeared in the trough, some twenty yards away. The lifejacket kept MacLeod afloat, but it hadn't self-righted and he was facedown in the water. Blood trailed in skeins around his head. Gervais knew he had scant minutes. He grabbed more lines and clipped them together to extend his tether, then dived into the sea.

Even with the protection of his wetsuit, the cold struck through him. Limbs and lungs became numbed as he fought to make headway against the drag of his clothing and the tug of the waves. It seemed to take a stretch of hours, but then he had a hand on MacLeod's shoulder, and with a practiced flip, he turned the body onto its back. Blood was pouring from MacLeod's nose and mouth in a steady flow, and Gervais groaned with relief. Dead men don't have blood pumping from their wounds. How badly injured MacLeod might be was another matter entirely.

Cursing his numb fingers, Gervais managed to get one of his lines onto MacLeod's harness and began to haul back to the yacht. It was hard work and the cold leeched at his strength. Heaving MacLeod's slack weight back onto the deck was going to be very difficult. He refused to admit it might be impossible.

Then MacLeod choked, tried to breathe in blood and sea, and choked again.

"Damn you to hell, Duncan MacLeod!" Gervais howled, jerking on the line that tethered them together. "Don't you even think of dying on me!"

"Gervais?" The voice was weak, hoarse, and one of the best sounds Gervais had heard in a long
"Well, it isn't a mermaid towing you home to Neptune." Thankfully, they were in the lee of the hull now, and a conscious MacLeod had a halfway decent chance of making it back onto the yacht. "Hold on to this line. I'm going to climb aboard, then I'll haul you up."

It proved to be far from easy, but MacLeod had more strength left in him than Gervais had thought possible. They struggled back onto the yacht and sprawled on the deck. MacLeod's hands were cupped over his face.

"God, I thought my nose was broken," he groaned into his palms.

"Are you sure it isn't?" Gervais demanded. "Let me see."

"Don't think it is. Hurts like hell, though." Obediently he lowered his hands, and yelped as Gervais gently felt along the ridge of bone and cartilage.

"I think you're okay. You must have been moving just fast enough to avoid most of the impact. My God, you were lucky," he said, and laughed. "Still pretty enough to give the Bouvin Brothers some competition."

"Huh!" MacLeod didn't seem amused. "Gervais, what the hell happened? Did we lose the rudder?"

"Yes, you could say that. Something hit the tiller arm." He hesitated. "Duncan, I know it sounds crazy, but--no, it is crazy! We're nearly a mile off shore, for God's sake. Come on, can you stand? You need to get into the cabin and warm up."

"So do you, and you're bleeding." Staggering like drunks, they supported each other into the relative warmth of the small cabin. Then MacLeod took hold of Gervais' right wrist and inspected the splinter-cuts. "What happened?" he asked again.

"I think someone shot at us."

MacLeod stared at him, something altering in his eyes. His expression didn't change, but somehow his face became feral. Dangerous. "You risked your life to save me," he said. "I won't forget that."

"It's no big deal." Gervais shrugged. "Just don't use it as an excuse not to put in an eight-hour day at the yard."

"Who's the enemy, Gervais?"

"We'll talk later, I promise. Right now we should get into the nearest harbor before we freeze to death. That'll be Diélette."

"After I've taken care of your arm."

"What about your face? Your nose may have stopped bleeding, but you could have fractured something."

"Maybe," MacLeod said. "If I'm lucky, though, I won't even have a couple of black eyes. Not the cold compress I would have chosen, but if it works, I won't complain. Let me take a look at those splinters."

"Don't have much luck with that arm, do I?" Gervais grumbled. He was freezing cold and shaking, feeling sick to his stomach, and he wouldn't show it. "First I break it, now it gets enough splinters
to make a hedgehog jealous."

"Who's looking for an excuse to get out of work?" MacLeod drawled. "Shut up and stay there while I get us something hot to drink. Hypothermia isn’t a good idea."

Gervais didn’t enjoy having the slivers of wood extracted. The cold-induced numbness was wearing off, and though MacLeod was quick and deft, it was an unpleasantly painful experience. Afterward they jury-rigged another tiller arm. MacLeod set the sails and Gervais tacked for the shore.

"There were no boats near us," Gervais said suddenly. "None. It couldn't have been a shot."

"It was," MacLeod said. "What else would shatter the tiller arm like that?"

"But we're nearly a mile out!"

"A crack shot with a good sniper rifle and one of the latest scopes could do it."

"You're not serious!" Gervais stared at him. "You're serious."

"Now tell me who you think it is."

"Duncan, you've only just signed on; maybe you should think about leaving, moving on. To Brittany, wasn't it?"

Dark eyes fixed on him. "I am in your service, Gervais Dubosc," MacLeod said with an oddly archaic formality, "You risked your life for me. On both counts, your enemy is my enemy."

Gervais only hesitated for a few seconds. "Henri Pasquier," he said. "He's my uncle. He has an estate agency in Flamanville. I think he's involved with a man called Jack Carston, and Carston has the rep of being a bad man to cross, business-wise rather than anything crooked. Henri is scared sick, a nervous wreck, and won't tell anyone why. We know he's had problems since Aunt Isabel died, and his daughter Simone's away at Rouen University, but there's more going on with him, I'm certain. Carston could be at the root of it, but what it is, I don't know. We've been watching him and his boat whenever he's over here, but so far we've learned nothing, except that he seems interested in the small harbors and out of the way beaches."

"Drugs?"

"And/or illegals." Gervais shrugged. "The European Union and the ECHR haven't managed to put a stop to bigotry and persecution. There are some desperate people out there, and there'll always be a few who'll take advantage of them. Not to mention the crooks trying to get away before the Law closes in on them."

"So who is this Carston?"

"Big money. Owns a chunk of Jersey," he said, waving an arm vaguely southwest toward the UK's Channel Islands. "Could be he wants to buy up a bit of Normandy as well. Could be that Uncle Henri is worried about something else completely unconnected with Carston. Maybe that bullet was someone taking pot-shots at seagulls."

"Maybe. The most logical place for the sniper to have been was up on the Cap. We should check it out. You should also report it to the Police Judiciaire."

"I suppose," Gervais sighed. "But if you're right and it is a crack-shot with a sniper rifle, then how
is it neither of us have holes in our bodies? That has to have been a warning shot. And if he meant to hit a tiller arm at about nine hundred yards, he can sure as shit hit a human being. Henri could well have good reason to be nervous. So, I'd like a lot more proof, apart from a broken tiller," he added gloomily. "Shit," he said again. "How do I explain this to M'sieur Marchant?"

"You don't have to," MacLeod smiled. "We get another tiller arm in Diélette. I'll fit it while you're having your punctures looked at by a paramedic, and we'll take the Firecrest on to Goury. We won't be delayed more than half a day at the most and M'sieur Marchant will be none the wiser. We should hang onto the bits of the old tiller arm, including the ones I dug out of you. It could be possible for a forensic test to get something from them."

"Okay. Then I'm going to have a chat with Uncle Henri."

"Why don't we see what we find on the Cap, first," MacLeod suggested. "No harm in having all the ammunition you can get for your uncle. As it is, the Cap will have to wait until tomorrow, it'll be too dark by the time we get back from Goury." He hesitated. "Uh, Gervais, what are you going to tell your grandparents? And the guys back at the yard?"

"Nothing to Grand-mère and Grand-père. But the others, of course they must be told. They might be next for the warning shot." He patted pockets until he remembered the phone was in the cabin. "In fact, I'll phone Yves now."

"Don't say anything about the Cap, or Jean-Michel will be up there doing his James Bond impersonation," MacLeod said with a smile.

"And ruining any signs that might have been left," Gervais grinned. "Point taken."

###

The following day, as soon as it was light, MacLeod and Gervais walked the coastal path over the Cap. The weather was bright and cold, much like the previous day. From this height, the view down along the coast was beautiful, while out to the southwest the islands of Jersey and Guernsey were clearly visible.

The two men left the main path and pushed their way through gorse and dead bracken to the cliff-edge. There were plenty of places where a sniper could lie with the gun-barrel resting solidly on rock, all giving a perfect shot at any vessel from a sail-board to a ferry and all hidden from the path by the bushes and rocks.

MacLeod's tracking skills had been imparted and honed by masters of the art, but nowhere could he see any sign that a gunman had lain for that single shot.

Gervais studied MacLeod's profile. "You've done this kind of thing before," he stated.

The man shrugged and nodded. "I've worn a uniform," he said, "travelled a lot."

"Huh. Paramilitary?"

MacLeod shrugged, said nothing.

"Okay, I can take a hint," Gervais sighed. "This isn't getting us anything except backaches. I need a..."
"Sounds good to me," MacLeod said absently, his eyes on the empty house ahead of them. "Gervais, who owns that place?" 

"House of the Lanterns?" He thought for a moment, then: "An old woman in Jersey!" he whooped. "A connection! We should take a look at it, yes?"

"Yes." MacLeod met his gaze and identical grins flashed across their faces. "What do you know about her?"

"Just her name: Madame Dominique De Carteret. We should ask Grand-mère Margot. She'll know more about her, for certain."

A high wall and wrought-iron gates separated the path from an overgrown garden that hadn't been tended in years. The three lanterns that gave the place its name were suspended from tall metal standards shaped like saplings, standing around an ornamental pool now clogged with algae and dead plants. A weed-covered concrete drive swept in a wide semi-circle up to the once white front of a three-story house. It was all curved rectangles that owed a lot to the Art Deco movement, to MacLeod's eye, and was topped by a trio of domed skylights, facetted like immense jewels.

What seemed to be patio doors were at the bayed ends of the frontage, closed off by wide green shutters. Between them were two sets of garage doors, and between the garage doors a wide stone arch carrying a flight of steps up to the green-shuttered front door on the next level. Shutters of the same color covered all the visible windows, and ivy festooned the balconies jutting from the second and third floors of the bays.

"My God, it's big," Gervais said. "I've lived here all my life and never really looked at it. But no one's been through this gate for years," he went on, rattling the rusted chain and padlock.

"Sure of that?" MacLeod smiled. He rubbed his fingers over the base of the padlock. "That's been oiled not so long ago, but let's not push our luck. Coming?" He took a quick glance around. Then he grabbed the top of the wall and jumped, swinging himself over and disappearing.

"No Scotsman is going to show a Norman the way," Gervais said, followed MacLeod over the wall, and along the curving drive to the base of the steps. "We'll be too exposed if we try to break in there," he said, peering up at the shuttered door.

"Which is why we're going round the back," MacLeod said. "If we can," he added, studying the way the ground rose around the house. It was as if the building grew out of the granite and the tangled remains of once formal flowerbeds.

Quickly the two men worked their way round the side of the house, scrambled over rockery-planted ledges and reached the second floor. Ahead of them was a steep climb up to the next story where the glass sides of a solarium, and a vegetation-draped wrought iron balustrade of spirals and inter-locking circles headed straight for the cliff edge, marked the seaward boundary of the property. Beyond the fancy ironwork, the solarium and the back of the house faced onto a large terrace.

Littered with leaf debris, it was an untidy expanse of stone flags and natural rock. Salt-streaked glass doors opened onto it from the solarium, from another much larger room, and from an L-shaped wing.

"Bet this is a real sun-trap in the summer," Gervais said, looking around curiously. "It's sheltered,
"Yes, and can't be overlooked from Le Sémaphore," MacLeod said. He crouched and inspected the terrace in front of the balustrade. "Ah. He stood here. The leaves and moss are scuffed. And there's a scrape on the ironwork. He lay down here and rested the gun-barrel on that curve." He straightened and leaned over the railing, looking down. "Whoa." He smiled. "Take a look at the view."

Gervais leaned beside him and peered down into a small, almost circular bay. The tide was high, leaving only a narrow strip of pale sand between the water and the tumbled rocks at the foot of the cliff. The only way down to it was a rusted spiral stair that wound from the near corner of the terrace.

"Look how the sea changes color," he said, pointing. "It's a shelf and a sharp drop there, and some nasty looking rocks under the water across the entrance. I wouldn't like to bring a boat in here at low tide."

"Nor me. But what's the betting someone was willing to risk it. There's no sign of anyone getting in the way we did, so I'd say our sniper came in by boat and climbed up here. Someone's used those steps recently, by the marks on them."

"And if he did, then a smuggler could," Gervais said quietly. "I think we should take a look inside."

With the careful use of a penknife and a length of bent wire, MacLeod forced the lock on the double doors beyond the solarium and they entered cautiously.

"God," said MacLeod, almost reverently. Quiet as it was, his voice woke echoes. They were standing on a airy gallery that ran around three sides and looked down into a spacious empty shell of a room. To their left and right, spiral stairs descended into shadow. Above them, the sunlight struck though the panels of the great glass dome, warming the air and spilling a pool of light into the dimness.

"This is amazing," Gervais murmured. "It's huge. Look at those pillars under us, they're like coils of rope, or something. No, vines? Thin tree trunks?"

MacLeod didn't reply. He gazed around the shadowy space, saw colors muted by dust and cobwebs He sniffed. The air smelled closed in, stale, and of something else. He sniffed again. "Cigarette smoke," he said.

"I can't smell anything," Gervais said.

"It's there, and look, there're footprints under the dust."

"I'll take your word for it." Gervais shrugged. "I'll wait outside and keep a lookout while you play Big Game Hunters, that way I won't mess up any of the signs."

"Okay."

Moving silently, even though he was certain no one else was inside the house, MacLeod drifted from room to room. More than enough light coming through the facetted domes for him to see most of the upper rooms. In addition to the skylight over the living-room, there was another over a room behind the solarium, and a third over a large room that made up the L at the end of the terrace. Beyond that were a couple of walk-in closets and through them what seemed to be a large en-suite bathroom, although it was too dim to see properly.
The light had shown something else; that most of the securely shuttered windows were formed of panes leaded into familiar shapes, their colors dull under years of dust and neglect. Someone had spent a small fortune on stained glass.

Down on the second floor, the living room area had a little less space than he'd thought. The stories had been cut into the granite of the Cap de Flamanville in deep, wide steps.

He found the stairs to the first floor behind a door by the neat L-shaped bar on the edge of the dining-kitchen area, but the blackness down there was absolute. Another flight went up into an equal darkness, presumably the backstairs to the upper rooms and maybe the roof, but it was too dark for exploration.

Opposite the dining area was another room, and a decadently spacious bathroom complete with a sunken bath big enough to hold most of Flamanville's rugby team, if the black rectangular pit in the middle of it was anything to go by.

The house intrigued MacLeod. Possibilities began to form in his mind, and he had to set them firmly to one side. Of more immediate interest was the detritus littering the floor.

###

MacLeod found Gervais perched on the balustrade smoking a cigarette when he returned to the terrace.

"Any luck?" Gervais asked.

"Someone's been here, more than once," MacLeod said. "Main water is turned on, but the electricity isn't. Rubbish has been left downstairs: old food wrappers, cigarette butts, and cans. The place is a mess, but not trashed."

"I've been down to the beach," Gervais said, flicking his cigarette over the rail to the rocks far below. "A boat has been moored to the bottom of the steps, and more than once. So, my friend, what do we do? It's as likely to be vagrants as illegals, and still isn't enough to take to André Roussel and the Police Judiciaire. Let's get back home, I want to talk to Grand-mère about this house."

###

They found Margot Dubosc in her kitchen, about to start the first stages of preparing the evening meal. She eyed the two men suspiciously, and they both aimed winning smiles at her. She didn’t melt.

"What is this?" she barked, hands on hips. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Grand-mère," Gervais said earnestly. "We're looking at a house. Duncan needs a place of his own—"
"Why?" Madame Dubosc demanded. "What's wrong with his room? His place at my table?"

"Nothing, Madame," MacLeod said quickly. "You and M'sieur Dubosc have made me more than welcome. It's become a second home to me."

"So I should think! So you may as well call us what everyone else in the yard and the team calls us."

"Grand-mère." MacLeod smiled with genuine delight. "You honour me. Thank you. But we do need to know about the house and who owns it. It might be important."

"Henri's troubles? Gervais!" She rounded on him, fists raised as if she would pummel him into submission. "Why did you not just say so?"

"Because I don't want to worry you," he said desperately, shooting an angry glare at MacLeod. "Grand-mère, I'm sorry, but this could get very nasty—"

"Hah! So can I! What house?"


"Dominique De Carteret's home." The old woman nodded. "It's been empty for years, poor soul. She's in a nursing home on the outskirts of St. Helier on Jersey. She must be in her nineties, at least." She gave a cackle of laughter. "Makes me feel young."

"Is it up for sale?" MacLeod asked.

"Oh, yes. Henri's had it on his books for years. Madame de Carteret was an old friend of his mother's, so she put it in his hands when she had to go into the home. But she keeps a firm hand on the reins. Or, at least, she used to. The last I heard she vets every prospective buyer, and if she doesn't like them, there's no sale, no matter how much they offer. If you want to know more about the place, then speak to Henri. Or go over to St. Helier and talk to Madame herself." She raked both men with sardonic eyes. "In fact, send Duncan, Matthieu and Jean-Michel. Between the three of them, they should be able to charm an old lady, no matter how formidable she is."

"Grand-mère, thank you." Gervais grinned, and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Uncle Henri next, I think. Duncan, if we find that Carston is buying the house, we have a problem."

"Maybe not." MacLeod shrugged and smiled. "I'll put in an offer. I like that place, Gervais, it has potential."

"We don't know how much the old girl wants for it. It could be a hell of a price for a dump that would have to be gutted and modernized, just to put a spike through Carston's wheel."

"A few years ago I sold some property in America, and my Paris barge. Since then I've been drifting. The money is still there in my bank, untouched, more than enough to cover the de Carteret house and its refurbishment."

"Seriously?" Gervais demanded.

"Seriously. Up on that terrace, I could just see a small yacht of my own moored in that bay…. I want that house, Gervais, and I will be damned if I'll let Carston use it for a moment longer than I have to, let alone buy it."

"Fine words," Margot said with a disparaging sniff, and gave them both a push toward the door.
"So go and put your money where your mouth is, young man."

###

Henri Pasquier's property agency was on Flamanville's main street, a small but up-market kind of establishment by the look of it. Gervais and MacLeod waited around outside until the current client left, then went in. Gervais flipped the door sign to 'closed'.

"Morning, Uncle," he said breezily. "Care to take an early lunch?"

Henri leaned back in his chair with a forced smile. "That's kind," he said. To MacLeod's eyes, the man did indeed look ill. He was pasty-grey. His eyes were heavy and red-rimmed and his hands had a white-knuckled tension to them. "But I really can't spare the time."

"Of course you can. It's a business lunch. This is Duncan MacLeod and he works for me. Duncan is staying with Grand-mère and Grand-père, but he needs a place of his own, so you were the first person I thought of. How about the House of the Lanterns?"

"No!" If anything, Henri became paler. "It's not for sale. Or rent."

"Hmm. That's not what Grand-mère said."

"It's under offer," Henri said desperately. "Madame de Carteret is considering it."

"Oh? Who? Or shall I make a guess. Carston?" Gervais was as subtle as a charging rhino, and MacLeod winced. For a moment he thought Henri was going to vomit.

"No," the man whispered, but he couldn't meet their eyes.

"Well, I don't think he's the kind of man we want in Flamanville," Gervais drawled. "What do you say, Uncle?"

"Gervais, please!" Henri pleaded. "Let it be!"

"M'sieur," MacLeod said quietly. "We can help."

"No! You don't know what he's--" He stopped and took out his handkerchief, pressing it to his mouth with a shaking hand.

"So tell me, Uncle. Please. What hold has he got over you?"

"My Simone," Henri whispered, "and you. Your wife and little Philippe. Gaspard and Margot. Simone--you know she's all I have left since her mother died. I have to try to persuade Madame de Carteret to sell to him."

"Why?" MacLeod asked. "What does he want with that house?"

"The bay. People can come and go without being seen."

"He is smuggling, then?"

"Yes. Illegals. Just a few at a time, big names who have to get out of their country. Gervais, let it
be, I beg you! People are going to get hurt. Maybe killed!"

"Will you talk to the Police Judiciaire? If I call André Roussel--"

"No! If you say anything to them, my daughter is dead--you, the others--we're all targets!"

"Your uncle has a point," MacLeod said before the indignant Gervais could answer. "Perhaps we should get back to the yard?"

"All right, Uncle Henri." Gervais sighed. "I'll think about what you've said. Don't worry. Things will work out for the best, you'll see." He gave the man a hug, and they left. Gervais waited until they were down the street before swearing aloud. "We have to do something!" he yelled. "That man is scared shitless!"

"We will," MacLeod said calmly. But before he could say more, Henri had come to the door and called their names.

"It can't go on," Henri said as they returned. "But I have to protect my Simone, you understand. Come back inside. I will phone Madame, ask her if she will see you, M'sieur MacLeod. If she does, and if she likes you, persuade her to put the house with another estate agent and buy it through them. I've already made an appointment with her and Carston for this afternoon."

"Thank you, M'sieur," MacLeod said.

"But the price, M'sieur. Beautiful though it is, the price Madame set is deliberately exorbitant, and it needs much modernization. The house is on the market at 500,000 euros."

Gervais whistled in shock and rolled his eyes at MacLeod.

"I can find the funds," he said.

"Good, good. Carston hasn't made his offer yet, but today he--" Henri cut off the words with a shudder, and began to search through a filing drawer, his hands still shaking. "Here is a brochure on the house. Make sure she likes you, wear your best clothes, make an impression. She is a lady of great character, but be careful with her. She is so very frail."

"Don't worry," Gervais soothed him. His glance at MacLeod was speculative. "We'll clean him up for her. What clothes do you have for seducing old ladies, Duncan?"

"None," he said, exasperated. "I--"

"We'll stop off at the Bouvins. Matthieu can meet us there. He's more or less your size." He was reaching for his cell phone as he spoke, so MacLeod took the line of least resistance. The Duboscs could give Amanda Darieux lessons in railroading.

"How soon can you get him to St Helier?" Henri asked, hand on his own phone.

"Very soon. The sea's calm, we've got young Leconte's speedboat in the yard and she's due a shakedown run."

"Good," Henri said again, as if he was trying to convince himself. He took a few deep breaths and started to dial.
"Good morning again, M'dame." Henri's voice was very cheerful. Too cheerful.

"Good morning, Henri," she said suspiciously, and waited.

"We have another prospective buyer."

"Oh, really?" Dominique was beginning to wish she'd never agreed to put her house on the market. Admittedly it had been empty for nearly ten years, ever since she'd been forced by ill health to come to this place, but even so, two in one day….

"Yes, M'dame. Duncan MacLeod. He's with the Dubosc Boatyard in Surtainville. Please, see him today, M'dame, as soon as possible and before you make any decision about M'sieur Carston."

Dominique nearly said no. "Of course," she bristled. "M'sieur Carston is due here at four o'clock? Then arrange your M'sieur MacLeod as you please, the sooner the better," she added, tiredness swooping down.

Abruptly all her years caught up with her, dragging her into that horrible grey murk she hated so much. Dimly she heard poor Henri's voice, still sounding so falsely bright, saying, "Two o'clock, then, M'dame..." as she dropped the phone on its rest. He tried very hard, and she knew she was a trial to him, especially on days like today when her ghosts came back to show her the futility of living.

She was ninety-eight years old and had outlived all her family: a husband, a daughter and a granddaughter who died too young to have children of her own. Too many griefs, and she could feel the tears sliding down her face. She hated this! The clammy self-pity of senility, the feebleness that didn't allow her to rule her own life, that drove her out of a home that had been sanctuary and paradise on earth for more than seventy years.

And which she must now sell, but only to a buyer approved by her. That much control, at least, she retained.

"Mrs. de Carteret?" Janet--Nurse Paton--loomed over her bed, and Dominique switched her mental gears from French to English. "Oh, dear. You've over-tired yourself again. Never mind, my dear. Would you like a nice cup of tea?" As if she was an importunate child instead of a senile old hag. Still, she meant well, so Dominique bit back the acid retort and forced a smile.

"Thank you," she said. "You're very kind. Oh Janet, I'll be having another visitor this afternoon. At two. Mr. Carston will still be coming at four."

"If you're well enough," she said cheerfully.

This time Dominique didn't hide her sting. "Nurse Paton," she snapped, managing to push herself up on her pillows, "I will be having another visitor this afternoon."

Janet looked at the old woman, her rather bovine face calm and determined, and Dominique knew that nothing she could say or do would shift the nurse one inch if Janet decided it was not in her charge's best interests.

"Alice will be in with your tea," she said gently. "Then rest as much as you can before lunch and we'll see how you are."
Inwardly Dominique was fuming, could feel her heart pattering in her chest and that made her angrier rather than scaring her. Somehow she managed a gracious smile.

"Thank you, Janet," she said again. Another round fought to a near-draw. She just wished she could win more of them.

She dozed for a while, waking to Janet's gentle touch on her shoulder.

"Your first visitor is here." The nurse was smiling. Her eyes were bright and an unaccustomed touch of color bloomed on her face. Alice hovered beside her, eyes shining, cheeks equally as pink.

"Oh, M'dame, he is so handsome," the girl whispered in French. "Is he family?"

"Of course he isn't," Janet snapped in English, but without any real heat. She could understand French better than she could speak it, but never attempted conversation in Dominique's native language. Alice was Jersey born and bred, and like most of the islanders, was bi-lingual. Always with Dominique she spoke French, and the old woman blessed her for it. "Alice will bring him in when you're ready," Janet went on. "I have already warned him he isn’t to tire you, and in any case, he can only stay for five minutes—ten at the most," she added as Dominique snorted a protest. She bustled out and Alice advanced with brush and comb.

By the time the girl had finished with Dominique, her hair was up in a sleek white chignon and after just a touch of foundation, a subtle hint of blusher and a tint of rose lipstick, the hand mirror showed an elegant elderly lady instead of the Wild Witch of the West. Once she had been lovely enough to turn every male head in any room she entered. Sometimes the echo of that showed through, as it did today.

And all the time she worked, Alice chattered on about the visitor. M'sieur MacLeod was tall, dark and handsome. M'sieur MacLeod was young, and wore no wedding ring. M'sieur MacLeod had smiled at her. He had brown eyes.…

Well, to put a sparkle in Janet's eyes, he'd have to be something rather special.

But handsome is as handsome does, and though Dominique had a penchant for beautiful young men, she was not and never had been, a gullible fool where they were concerned.

Finally she was preened to Alice's satisfaction, and the girl helped her into her wheelchair, pushed her through to her private sitting-room. Thanks to the sleep and her medication, Dominique was able to do most of the maneuvering herself, and she parked herself by the window with the small table close by and the couch to one side.

"Ready, M'dame?" Alice smiled. "I'll go and fetch him. Just ring the bell if you want tea brought in."

"Any excuse for you to ogle the poor man." Dominique chuckled. "He is only coming to see me about my house, girl, not to spend the afternoon in small-talk."

###

"M'sieur--Mr. MacLeod to see you, M'dame," Alice said, switching to English with a slight stammer, and bolted out of the room. He walked in, shutting the door behind him.
"Madame de Carteret," he said, and like Alice, he spoke French, "it's good of you to see me so quickly."

Duncan MacLeod was indeed tall, dark and more than ordinarily handsome, Dominique observed. His hair was combed straight back into a ponytail, groomed to neatness. His eyes were that hot dark amber-brown, deep enough to drown in if one was so inclined, set under heavy eyebrows and framed in ridiculously long thick lashes. Why was it men had longer eyelashes than women? Her Leon had had eyes like that…. His voice was pleasant, slightly husky and his accent was of Normandy. He wore a cream silk knit sweater and dark brown pants, and he moved with the controlled economy of movement of a large cat. No wonder Janet had sparkled and blushed, while young Alice was completely besotted.

"Please, sit down," Dominique said with a smile, gesturing to the couch. "No doubt my agent has told you I am an eccentric to be humoured?"

His answering smile would have been devastating if she’d been fifty years younger, and if she hadn’t seen the shadow behind the smile that spoke to her of her own shadows.

"He told me you were a lady of great character," he said as he shook her hand with gentle care.

Dominique smiled up at him. Old age may have weakened her body, but not her artist's mind and heart.

And he was beautiful. But she could see that much of the life and fire of him was walled away behind barriers of granite. Beyond that wall he was wounded and isolated, she knew it as surely as she knew her own losses. Yet he was so young; late-twenties perhaps, early-thirties at the most, a man in the prime of his life, too young to be alone.

"So, M'sieur," she said, as she did to all those who came to make offers for her house, "tell me what you would change?"

He hesitated, and she waited to hear the usual "Nothing, Mrs. de Carteret, it is perfect as it is." Humoring her, because she was old and fragile. But his pause was to gather his thoughts.

"I like height and light and wide spaces," he said, "so I'd paint the living-room cream. The bedroom would be white and gold, maybe with fine details of blue and green to pick up the colors of the stained glass behind the bed. The room behind the solarium I'd turn into a study, with folding Japanese-style screens so it could be shut off from the solarium if I wanted. I'd fit solar panels to the roof between those incredible skylights, and repair the steps down to the beach."

For a brief moment, his sorrow had retreated, showing Dominique a glimpse of the man beneath, and her heart hurt for him. But here was this rather devastating young animal calmly telling her how he would alter that perfect jewel of a place. And make it his place, no longer hers. Dominique sighed. That was the way it should be. "The glass, M'sieur MacLeod," she said. "Would you change that?"

"Good God, no," he said with a snort. "I don't destroy art. That glass is one of the reasons why I want pale walls; to let the light paint all those fantastic colors across them."

"A good point," she acknowledged. "Did Henri tell you I designed and made those windows and skylights?"

"No, M'dame." He frowned slightly, smile a little wry. "I recognised the style--Jinevre's La Tène--" He broke off and his smile widened with a very real delight. "You are Dominique Jinevre."
She nodded, more pleased than she could say that he’d recognised her work. Oh, it had never been fashionable; Art Deco and its heavier, more angular shapes had stolen the hearts of the general public. The beautiful fluid lines first created two thousand years ago in the metalwork of the Iron Age La Tène period, she had translated into leaded shapes of colored glass. Every window in her home was all or part stained glass, even if it was only a small medallion set like a talisman among the larger panes. Ironic that it had taken the rest of the world fifty or more years to have a Celtic Revival, and then it was the Book of Kells that had mainly fuelled it, not the earlier Iron Age artwork.

"It must have been very hard to give it up," he was saying quietly, and she pulled herself back to the present.

"Yes," Dominique said. "Leon, my husband, made the wrought-iron work to my design and carved the front door. He, too, was an artist, as well as an architect." She was silent for a moment, eyes misty. "But needs must as the Devil and ill-health drive, M’sieur MacLeod. So, tell me, are you married, M’sieur?" she went on. The old can get away with rampant curiosity. "You have a partner to share my house with?"

"No, M’dame," he said, those expressive eyes darkening. "She died. Some years ago."

"I’m so sorry. There are children?"

"No, M’dame."

"Ah, then you have only memories of her. That is sad. What was her name?"

"Tessa."

"Forgive me. I am a nosy old woman, and I should not cause you such pain. Will you take tea with me, M’sieur?" He hesitated, then nodded, offered her a distant smile. Dominique rang the bell and Alice bounced into the room as fast as she’d left it a short while ago. "Tea, please, Alice. Unless M’sieur MacLeod would prefer coffee?"

M’sieur MacLeod was happy with tea, and after Alice had brought in the tray and departed, they talked commonplace inanities for a while. Or rather, Dominique did, chattering away to give him time to reaffirm his barriers. Over his shoulder she saw the door open a crack and Janet peered in. The nurse gave her a stern look that said more plainly than words, "Don't overtire yourself!" and silently shut the door again.

"M’sieur MacLeod," Dominique said, leaning forward and taking his hand in both of hers. It was a large hand, long-fingered and calloused as if he had known hard work in his short life. "I love that house. In 1934 my husband designed its form and structure, and I created the décor. The happiest times of my life were spent there. No matter where we travelled in the world, always we came home to the House of the Lanterns. I hope it will become as much of a haven and a home for you as it was for me. I accept your offer, M’sieur MacLeod."

He looked startled, then ridiculously pleased.

"Ma Dame," he said, making of the courtesy a charmingly old-fashioned honorific, "thank you."

"There is another who was coming to see me this afternoon about my home, I'll cancel him and we can talk business whenever you wish."

His face changed, became rather grim and his eyes studied her closely, as if assessing her strength. Dominique felt a chill.
"Ma Dame, please don't. Let him come, listen to him, let him think you will consider his offer, then be too ill to see him for a while."

"Why?" she demanded. Janet came into the room and she shooed her away with an impatient hand. "Why, M'sieur MacLeod?" He glanced at the nurse and remained silent. "M'sieur, I will have an answer."

His smile came again, rueful and devastatingly sweet. "M'sieur Pasquier told me you were frail, Ma Dame, he was wrong. You are tempered steel. Because Jack Carston has the reputation of being a ruthless businessman and he has decided he wants your house. M'sieur Pasquier does not want any undue pressure brought on you, which would happen if Carston thought there was another buyer in the picture."

"Mr. MacLeod," Janet snapped. She had obviously managed to follow the swift flow of French enough to pick up on the warning. "I will not have my patients subjected to this!"

"Janet, it's all right," Dominique said quickly, changing to English. Her heart was racing, yes, but something within her was waking up. "Janet, does this Carston person have that kind of reputation?"

"Well, yes," the nurse admitted reluctantly.

"So. I have already agreed to sell you my home, M'sieur MacLeod; we will get that started. Janet, is Mr. Draycott still in his office? Would you ask him to come to see me as soon as possible. Now, if he can manage it. He is the home's legal and financial adviser," Dominique went on as the nurse left. "He often looks after our matters as well and he is very efficient. He will know what to do and get it done swiftly."

"Ma Dame, you are amazing," MacLeod said, reverence in his voice. Dominique gave a triumphant and unladylike snicker.

"Yes," she said, "I am, aren't I?"

###

When Duncan MacLeod finally left it was gone three o'clock and Dominique was exhausted. Janet insisted she go back to bed, and for once she didn’t argue. But she didn’t sleep. She lay in a comfortable drowse and planned.

When four o'clock approached, Alice came with tea and biscuits, and Dominique began her preparations.

"I won't get up for Mr. Carston," she said. "Just tidy me up, my dear, and don't worry about me. I'm going to be fluffy and vague and not quite here as far as he is concerned."

"Nurse Janet thinks you should have cancelled him, no matter what your M'sieur MacLeod said," the girl muttered.

"Oh, no, that wouldn't have done at all. He was right, and we are going to play a little game with Mr. Carston until my home is safely with M'sieur MacLeod."
"I think you're enjoying this," Alice said. She sounded slightly shocked.

"I am," Dominique agreed. "I haven't had so much fun in years."

Jack Carston was something of a surprise. He was in his forties, a big man, as tall as her M'sieur MacLeod and heavier set. His face was rugged rather than handsome, but attractive all the same, with tousled sandy hair and very blue eyes under bushy brows. He had a weathered, outdoors look to him, and if it hadn’t been for the coldness in those rather impressive eyes, she might have been inclined to trust him. Might have, until he gave his answer to her stock query about his plans for the house:

"Nothing, Mrs. De Carteret," he said with a laugh that rang too loud in her bedroom. "It's perfect as it is."

###

Carston left the nursing home pleased with the progress made. While the old girl hadn't agreed to his terms right away, it was clear enough she was taken with him and his offer. It would only be a matter of time. He could afford to give her a little leeway while he dealt with the Dubosc's and their stubborn curiosity, and there was no time like the present. He took out his cell phone. "Philippa," he said to his secretary, tell Patric Theroux to call me." While he was waiting, Carston keyed in Henri Pasquier's number. His conversation with the estate agent was terse and very much to the point.

###

Although Methos didn’t go chasing off to Algiers, he found it difficult to get the missing immortal out of his thoughts. Lying in the shade of a palm tree on a Jamaican beach didn't provide much in the way of distractions for his errant thoughts.

MacLeod had come into his life when he was in one of his mercifully rare stagnant periods. Had come in with all the subtlety of an earthquake, and disrupted everything Methos had carefully built over the years.

One of the things that had drawn Methos to him, no matter how reluctantly, had been his vitality, the sheer joy of living that burned in the younger immortal. It had touched a part of Methos that he’d thought dead for centuries, and had forced him out of that nice, safe rut he’d assiduously dug himself into for a very long time. Forced him to start living again. That comment of Dawson's still stung, damn the man. The inevitable had happened; MacLeod had melted enough barriers to let Methos fall in love with Alexa, and he wouldn’t have traded those days with her for the most secure bomb-shelter on the planet, regardless of the pain her inexorable death brought him.

Unlike himself, there had been nothing jaded about Duncan MacLeod, no real cynicism. A mere four hundred plus years of living had left a few invisible scars, but he’d been by no means crippled. Yes, the man had gone through some difficult times, but he was beginning to show signs of growing up. This vision-quest, or whatever it was, should only be a hiccup in the developing maturity.
Sooner or later he would give up looking for non-existent reasons and settle back down to get on with his life. And Methos would once more come and go as he pleased, turning up when he needed to warm his soul beside the hearth-fire that was MacLeod's complex quickening, secure in his welcome. No matter how long he'd been away, they'd always slipped straight back into the familiar routine, picking up conversations, topics, as if the gap had been scant hours rather than months. Or years.

But now it was MacLeod doing the wandering. That didn’t sit comfortably with Methos, and not just because there was no focal point for him to home in on. Okay, it wasn't as if MacLeod had never done anything like it before, but Methos hadn't known him then. Now it was different.

The year MacLeod had spent in the monastery after Richie Ryan's death didn't count, because Methos had made it his business to find out exactly where he was. Having located him, Methos had left him to it. MacLeod had to find his own way out. Which he'd done, and defeated an enemy that Methos had been convinced didn’t exist outside of MacLeod's troubled mind.

Methos chopped off that line of thought. Ahriman was an aberration that should not exist in a sane world, and he didn’t want to think about it. He himself had seen nothing, sensed nothing, not even when Richie was lying headless at his feet. If Joe hadn’t told him of his later experiences, he wouldn’t have believed any of it. MacLeod, typically, refused to talk about it at all.

MacLeod's retreat to a monastery on that occasion had been for a specific purpose: to temper the twin blades of body and will. His was not Darius' path, to enter a religious order and spend the rest of his years in contemplation and prayer, and working selflessly for The Good of Mankind. Nor could Methos see him taking Connor's route and voluntarily going into Sanctuary. If the Watchers ever set up another one. Which they probably would, and Methos didn’t blame them for wanting to hedge their bets.

Damn it, he missed the Scottish idiot, and he didn't like the implications of that. There had been others, closer to him than Duncan MacLeod, some of whom he'd killed with his own hands, and the lack of them didn't feel quite like this. But he'd never held a fragment of their quickening as he did MacLeod's.

1996--Elysium Churchyard, Bordeaux

The cemetery was deserted, apart from the permanently dead, of course, the ones who didn't fight their way out of their graves. Methos' smile was mirthless, and he slouched against an overly ornate gravestone without reverence.

The message he'd left had been no more than a few words, and it was a moot point whether or not MacLeod would come. He half-hoped he wouldn't.

By all the bloodstained Gods, what had happened in that submarine base? His brain still felt as if it was on fire, roiling with Kronos and the savage gentle beast that was Silas, and despite his centuries, Methos had barely been able to contain them both. He hunched into his coat, spared a brief concerned thought for MacLeod, so much younger and having to contend with Kronos and Caspian.

As if summoned, the Horsemen seethed to the surface, a maelstrom in his head, separate entities still. Grief and guilt tore at Methos and he stumbled upright, momentarily disoriented. He needed balance—an anchor—and deep within the cold central core of ultimate Self that even Kronos could never breach, he found an unexpected lodestone.

Methos didn't question its presence, just curled himself around its warmth and held on, bringing his
immense will power to bear on the storm within.

"Why?" A bellow from Silas. "I am your Brother!"

"So is he," Methos whispered.

"No!" It was a primal howl of fury from Kronos. "You are mine! I own your soul, Methos!"

"No," he replied with grim certainty. "You never did and never will." Coldly, precise as a surgeon, he finally severed the links, and they became no more than glyphs on a scroll. All of Silas' life-energy and part of Kronos' were now his, their memories stored and filed and unable to hurt or harm. Unless he let them.

A Presence touched him, no more than a fleeting contact on the edge of his perception, a sharp discordance as unsettling as a knifepoint scraped across glass. MacLeod?

Methos straightened and half-turned.

Cassandra was outside. He caught a brief glimpse of her just before she ducked out of sight.

"You don't do lurking very well," he called, and strolled casually to the gate, walked through. "Come on out." There was a gun in his pocket. As soon as she came close enough, he would shoot her and disappear.

There was a long pause, then Cassandra stepped into view, her hands empty at her sides. The recent fog had dampened her hair into a wild tangle of long curls, triggering ancient memories he would just as soon forget. She was beautiful and strong--and thanks to him, more than a little unhinged.

"Why?" she demanded, an unknowing echo of Silas. "They were your Brothers and Duncan is nothing to you."

He didn't deny it. "While they lived they'd always be a danger to me," Methos said. "MacLeod is handy with a sword." He shrugged. "Q.E.D."

"He is a child compared to us!" she shouted, hands curling into fists. "Did you stop to think what those—those demons would do to him? Did you even wonder if he could assimilate what they are without being tainted by them?" Her voice was rising to a strident screech. "Do you have any idea who he is, how important he is? What have you done to him that he can't see you for what you are?"

Methos sighed and scratched his head.

"Um, which question would you like me to answer first?" he said mildly. "Or will yes, no, yes, yes, and nothing, do?" He might as well have saved his breath.

"Why did he save your life?" Cassandra hissed. She came forward, a feral pounce to her stride that never used to be there, back in the good old days. Methos shoved his hands into his pockets, fingers curling round the butt of his gun. He should shoot her now.

"Maybe because he owed me?" he snapped. "I'd saved yours for him, remember, or did you think Silas' axe was purely decorative?" All he had to do was squeeze the trigger, didn't even have to take the bloody thing out of his pocket. He liked guns. They were so small and efficient.

"Or maybe because he wanted to punish you—the way I do! Have you thought of that?" She laughed. "You, on your knees and weeping like a brutalized child—like a tortured villager! Like a
raped woman! Oh, Methos, that was so good to see!" She came closer, and his forefinger began to
tighten on the trigger. "So I'll let you live for a while longer. Oh, not because Duncan begged for
your life--"

"Your precious Duncan didn't beg for anything. He commanded it. And you obeyed. Just like you
always did."

She screamed and struck at him, open-handed, with nails hooked to tear at his face. He caught her
wrist, held her. She struggled, then suddenly her eyes narrowed and she froze. "What have you
done?" She gasped, reached out with her free hand and touched his chest. "But you didn't! You
don't even know, do you--" and she began to laugh.

Methos let her go and stepped back, frowning. "I think you've been skipping your medication," he
said. "Go away, Cassandra. Leave me alone."

"Gladly!" she said with a sneer. "You think I don't know the kind of hold Kronos had on you? How
he could reach into your soul? That's why he's there, now, you know." She laughed again, and
there was a hysterical edge to the sound that grated on Methos' ears. "A shared quickening. Do you
know how rare that is? It shouldn't have happened, but Kronos made it happen. He was a
Vorarigni. Did you know that? All those years you spent with him, all those centuries, and he was
feeding on you! I didn't understand it then, and I don't think you did, either. It's a rare gift, Methos!
Very rare, and one you don't have. But Duncan MacLeod has it. Think about that, Death! And hear
me laughing all the days of your life!"

"Have you thought about acting as a career move?" Methos drawled. "You always did have an
appetite for overblown melodrama."

Cassandra backed away from him, still laughing, though tears were sliding down her cheeks.
"Beware the child, Death, when he is full-grown." She stepped sideways into an alley, running
footsteps echoed briefly and were gone, her Presence fading with them.

Methos didn't move for a long time. Then slowly he took his hands out of his pockets, placed them
folded on his chest where hers had rested.

The lodestone was still there, in the place that had always been empty until today. He closed his
eyes and images were in his head; a banked fire with a furnace hidden beneath, warm velvet on a
winter's night, a sword sheathed but implicitly lethal, a great bronze shield embossed and beautiful
leaning against the sword.

"What--?" The sound of his own voice startled him, breaking the spell, and he opened his eyes, let
his hands drop. No. Cassandra was playing mind-games with him, and he'd be damned to hell
before he'd give her the satisfaction of letting her strike home. He'd give MacLeod another five
minutes, then he was out of here. Wearily he went back to his tombstone and perched on it,
hunched over like a bedraggled crow.

Then slowly straightened as an immortal approached. No jar of opposing dissonance this time, but
a deep chord that wound through him. With it came that banked fire and the velvet, the sheathed
blade and the shield.

Unsteady, disbelief shuddering through him, Methos got jerkily to his feet. MacLeod stood in the
gateway, jaw set, dark eyes wary, but unaware. Oh, merciful Gods, he didn't know….

Methos hugged that knowledge to himself, surrounded his lodestone with walls of adamant and ice.
He studied MacLeod's face, looking for signs of--what? The man had taken two ancient
quickenings. Caspian was an elemental force that would give anyone trouble, while Kronos-- Methos shivered and resisted the urge to wrap his arms around himself and huddle against the chill that filled him. Kronos had surged from MacLeod to him, a wildfire assault of venom, of hate and lust and fury that had scoured at his soul…. "Are you all right?" he asked. MacLeod nodded.

"Yeah. You?"

"I'm--fine."

They talked briefly, walking the cemetery an arms' length apart. But there was more than a physical distance between them, one that wouldn’t be readily bridged. Methos was in no hurry for the bridge to be built. MacLeod might discover what Kronos had done when the Horseman had made that impossible leap to Methos: that a fragment of MacLeod's own quickening had been ripped from him and was held safe and secure.

MacLeod might want to take it back.

Methos didn’t want that.

By mutual and unspoken agreement, he and MacLeod went their separate ways, their paths widening until their quickenings no longer overlapped. There was a lot that hadn't been said, so much that needed to be said, but Methos couldn’t find the words. Nor if he did, the strength to speak them.

Not then, nor since.

Vorarigni. No. That was one thing MacLeod was not. Its antithesis, perhaps: a Datorigni, as Darius had been. A Giver of Fire, not a Devourer like Kronos. Somewhere in his own Chronicles, he'd recorded what Darius had told him of Ignifers, the Fire Bearers. He should start some research of his own, because if that was the potential the priest had seen in the younger immortal, then it must surely be augmented by the immensely powerful quickenings MacLeod had taken in comparatively recent years: Caspian, Kronos, Connor MacLeod, and Jacob Kell. Used unknowingly or unwisely, it was a dangerous talent. Playing with fire always was.
Melissa’s time and funds were limited. They lodged in a moderately priced hotel in Taipei, on the northern tip of Taiwan, and the money set aside for this training period was rapidly running out. She had no more assets to sell and she didn’t want to break into the fund put aside for the final operation. Robert was as ready as he would ever be, physically. Mentally was another matter. Winning a martial arts tournament was a little different to a kill-or-be-killed battle. The boy had the skill, but did he have the necessary instinct to take a life? To be exact, to take a head?

Abruptly, Melissa sat on the edge of her bed. Everything hinged on this, on Robert. All the months of careful preparation, of giving him just enough of the right information, building up the persona of Duncan MacLeod and Robert’s own role. She had no backup plan, no other resource. If the boy failed, then it had all been for nothing. All that would be left to her was a simple execution, and that was simply not good enough. Matthew deserved far more than that.

Robert had to be put to the test. All she needed was an opponent for him, but that proved easier said than found.

For many months, Melissa hadn’t dared the Watchers' firewalls in case they could track back. But now she had to take the chance. She would go in, get the information she needed, and they would be on the plane within the hour.

Quietly she left their hotel room and waved down a cab to take her across Taipei to an apartment block. She’d built an elaborate plan, acknowledging to herself that she was being paranoid. But she’d far sooner be that than caught out by the Watchers. So, a couple of weeks ago, in the guise of a potential buyer Melissa had been shown around the empty penthouse suite. She’d gleaned the information that the current owners weren’t due back for another month.

Now Melissa forced the lock and let herself in. Quickly she booted up the laptop and modem she used specifically for hacking, and got to work.

It was slow going. The firewalls were difficult, but eventually she was in. Melissa didn’t stop to browse. Her heart rate escalating with each moment it took, she searched out names and downloaded files as quickly as she could, and got out of the apartment fast. The Watchers would almost certainly have the technology to track an intruder, and on the chance that there was a Watcher cell in Taipei, she was not going to hang around.

Back at her hotel, Melissa read through the files she’d selected. Duncan MacLeod was still missing, so was Adam Pierson. Joseph Dawson was still in Research and still based in Paris, Amanda Darieux was in Los Angeles.

Matthew's private Watcher files had given her plenty of names to choose from. He’d put together comprehensive lists of the main players, the young up-and-comings, those who would definitely not be missed by any civilised law-abiding society, and those who walked the grey areas just the wrong side of the Law. There were an awful lot of those. Matthew had initially intended those lists to be an aid for when he and his team selected whom they would put into involuntary Sanctuary after Jacob Kell's depredations, but Melissa had a better use for them. The newly downloaded Sightings Bulletin told her that two of those immortals were within easy reach of Taipei. Both were young, one less than fifty years from his first death. Michael Prescott was one of the grey immortals. He would be a good choice for Rob's trial by combat.

They flew to Singapore on the first flight out.
Luck was on Melissa's side, and she was able to book them into the hotel next to the one Prescott was staying at. She didn’t believe in luck, or omens, but any doubts she might have had were dispelled. Everything would go as planned.

Leaving Robert with strict instructions not to leave his room, she paid a visit to Prescott's hotel. With a little distraction trick, she got a look at the register. Stella Green was in a room right next door to her immortal.

Later on in the day, Melissa identified the Watcher without too much trouble. Prescott had dinner in the hotel restaurant that evening, so did Stella. The tables were allocated to room number. The short, tubby woman with the graying dark hair looked like a small-time businesswoman, the sort of person no one would look at twice. To be sure, Melissa looked more than that until she caught a brief flash of the Watcher's tattoo showing under the cuff of her conservative white blouse.

The next day, Stella Green had an unfortunate accident. A hit and run driver sideswiped her car and sped off. The car was later found burnt out and abandoned. Stella was in the hospital with a broken leg and arm. Melissa didn’t want any report reaching the Watchers about the reappearance of Duncan MacLeod until she was ready.

###

Sunlight glowed on sweat-glossed bronze skin, rich highlights showed in the long dark hair that drifted and clung across the wide shoulders, and the tall, perfectly proportioned body moved with the fluid grace of a great cat, hunting. The expression on the handsome face was intense concentration, an almost-frown pulling down the thick brows.

Melissa smiled fondly at the young man on the balcony. She never tired of watching him; he was poetry in motion like this, stripped to the waist, oblivious in the midst of his kata.

Melissa waited until he finished the final form. "Robert," she said gently. He glanced round, his answering smile lighting up his face. "You're ready for your Rite of Passage, my dear."

For a moment, he looked apprehensive, then pleased. "Good," he said. "I was beginning to think it'd never happen. When? Where?"

He didn’t, Melissa realized, ask 'who?' "Tonight," she said. "His name is Michael Prescott and he's a contract killer. He blows things up." Something of a gross exaggeration. Prescott was an expert in industrial espionage, and sometimes explosions had to happen, though usually without any loss of life. Robert, as always, hung on every word and believed every word. "The Botanical Gardens. There'll be a concert going on, so large parts of it will be deserted, and I've already picked out the perfect place. We'll have a good look at it after lunch, so you'll know every inch of it, every blade of grass. Then you'll phone him, give Duncan's name and tell him where to meet you." She leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss on his brow. "You'll be fine," she said proudly. "I am so pleased with you, my dear."

###
Rob took the photo-frame from his suitcase and put it on the bedside cabinet. It was a leather-bound wallet that opened out to show two pictures. On the left were his parents, smiling at him with love and pride. The photo had been taken when he’d won the State Tai Kwon Do tournament. A year later Quinn Chrétien was dead and Rob had been pitchforked into a nightmare that only Melissa had made sane. His throat closed up and he had to swallow back the grief. The loss of his father left a gaping hole in his life that had been so safe and secure. The enforced separation from his mother made it worse. She would need him there, now more than ever, but she’d understand he had to do this task. Wouldn't she?

The second photograph in the frame was of a man who might have been his twin, especially now his hair was long enough to tie back with one of those Celtic silver clasps Melissa had insisted he wear. It was a stern face, determined, and the mouth was set so that the fullness of the lower lip was less obvious. Rob had seen other pictures where that so-familiar face was transformed by the warmth of a smile, dark eyes alight with laughter. But this was the Warrior, the Immortal Champion and Defender, and it was his favorite, the one that went everywhere with him. The one he talked to.

"Duncan," he whispered, though Melissa's room was across the hall and there was no way she could hear him. "I've never killed anyone before. I don't know if I can." He paused, took a deep breath. "I don't think I want to. Unless they're the bad guys," he added. "Don't be mad at me. I love the contest, the combat, I really do, but--" The solemn weight of those deep eyes seemed to see right into his heart.

"I guess you feel the same way, but it's something we have to do, right? I won't let you and Melissa down, I promise. Just show up soon, huh? I want to go home." If he could have his father's killer at the end of his sword, he would have no hesitation in removing his head with one stroke. But Melissa had told him someone had already done that, not long after Quinn Chrétien had fallen. Rob didn't glance at his mother's image. It would hurt too much. Melissa had forbidden any contact, but over the months he’d sneaked the odd letter and postcard into the mail. He'd been cautious, though, and hadn't written much; just that he was okay and would be home as soon as he could and she wasn't to worry. But he knew she would.

Melissa was his rock of stability in the strangeness of his new world, and he had quickly come to love and trust her almost as much as he did his mother, but Melissa could never replace Stacie Chrétien. The novelty of travel and exotic places had long since worn thin; Rob wanted his remaining family, his home, his friends and his familiar things around him. There were a couple of girls he missed as well. Rob wasn't used to living like a monk, but Melissa said it was necessary, so he went along with it. Because he also wanted to fulfill the role for which Melissa was preparing him.

Rob made the phone call, hearing his own voice crisp and matter-of-fact, belying the knot of nervous tension in his gut. Prescott's response was startlement, then wary acceptance. Ten o'clock, the Botanical Gardens, far from the busy throng around the concert area.

###

The white ivory hilt of the katana fit Rob's hands as if created for him alone. All his nervousness melted away, just as it did on the brink of a tournament. He was calm, poised, and confident.

Melissa had shown him videos of Prescott's fights; the man used what she called a falchion, a
heavy, one-edged blade with a slight curve to the end of it where it thickened out. His fighting style was a blend of European and Oriental, and while Prescott had a lot of upper body strength, he wasn’t noticeably fast on his feet. Every time, he'd won by the crushing power of his weapon and muscles.

Rob knew he had the measure of this man, knew his own speed, skill and strength. He knew he could defeat Prescott, he just didn't know if he could kill him. Melissa was watching, some distance away. He also hoped that somehow his father was, too, and would be proud of him.

A man appeared through the belt of night-fragrant trees and came toward him.

"Mike Prescott," the stranger said. "Of Canberra."

"I'm Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod," Rob said and settled into guard.

"It's an honour to cross swords with you." Prescott grinned. "Let's see how good you really are--" and came in unexpectedly fast.

The fight was brutally swift, soon over and not at all like any contest Rob had been in before. He made one mistake at the onset, and Prescott battered through his guard to open up a deep slice in his left arm. Barely feeling the wound, Rob spun away from the falchion, landed a kick on the Australian's right elbow that spasmed the man's fingers and the heavy blade dropped to the grass.

Rob didn't think about what he was doing. His reactions were pure instinct; he spun again and the katana scythed through Prescott's neck.

Nothing Melissa had told him had fully prepared Rob for the impact of his first quickening. He'd seen the videos, but mere pictures and words couldn’t express the agony and ecstasy that hammered into him with the living light that had been Mike Prescott. Images came with it, faces, places, emotions; a red-haired woman and two giggling children--wide pastures and grazing horses--broad tree-lined streets--the blazing shock of knowing he was finally, irrevocably, dying--

"Robert?" He was on his knees, he realized, and his name was Dun--Rob Chrétien…. "Oh, my dear! Quinn would have been so proud of you! Well done! Now your Quest begins."

Quest? Dazed and disoriented, Rob got to his feet. He didn't look at the Australian's decapitated body, knowing he'd flash on the image of his father's death. It wasn't a quest. He was just a decoy, a stalking-horse. The Champion's stand-in. But that was okay….

###

As soon as he'd left the nursing home, MacLeod phoned the boatyard and reported his success. Now, when he came into the marina and coasted to a halt by the boatyard's mooring, he found five grinning men waiting for him. Matthieu caught the rope and tied it off, and MacLeod was pulled into a boisterous maul of hugs and backslappings.

"It isn't mine yet," he pointed out, but that was shrugged off as a mere detail.

"It's only a matter of time," Gervais said, "and more to the point, Carston is sidelined. I've called Grand-mère and told her, but you need to tell her yourself. I phoned Henri as well. He was relieved, to put it mildly."
"Even so," Yves said dourly, "something could still go wrong. It isn't a done deal until the contracts are signed, and that isn't going to happen overnight, no matter how fast it's pushed through. We still need to be careful, and so does Henri."

Jean-Michel and Matthieu shouted down his caution, but Gervais and MacLeod nodded.

"Let's take this to the office," Gervais said. "Duncan looks half-frozen, and I could do with a hot drink, myself."

Coffee was brewed and passed around, and for a while the talk was of sport and family matters.

The phone rang and Gervais took the call. He listened in silence for a while, then spoke a few quiet words and put the phone down.

"Listen up." He raised his voice enough to cut through the general banter and rugby-talk that filled the office. Silence fell and heads turned expectantly. "That was Uncle Henri," Gervais announced. "He said he's been told to tell me that curiosity killed the cat and next time it won't be just a tiller arm." He paused briefly as the Bouvin brothers and Thierry came to their feet, shouting. MacLeod and Yves stayed where they were--quiet, waiting. "That confirms it," Gervais went on. "He has noticed us watching him and the sniper was his man. Which means Carston does have something to hide."

"It also means," Yves said calmly, "that someone could get hurt or killed."

"Yes," Gervais agreed. "So if any of you want to quit, I'm prepared to give a month's pay in lieu of notice and you can stay safe. This is, after all, a Dubosc matter, and you have family, wives, kids."

"So do you," Matthieu said. "I don't have a wife. I'm staying."

"And me," said Jean-Michel.

"What do you take me for?" Thierry grunted. "I worked for your father, and I'm working for you. Marie knows what's been going on and she's with me all the way. I'm going nowhere!"

"Same here," said Yves. "I've talked things over with Eloise, she knows the score."

"That was before these threats," Gervais snapped. "You haven't thought this through!"

"Don't need to," Jean-Michel snorted. "This is our fight, too. It isn't just a Dubosc matter: it effects everyone who lives in this area."

"Duncan?" Gervais said. "You didn't sign on to be shot at or threatened. He's just raised the stakes and I think you should reconsider your decision to stay."

"I don't," MacLeod said grimly. "All the more reason not to go. Jean-Michel is right. It affects everyone. I want to live here, spend a good part of the next dozen or more years here. I also owe you, Gervais. I'm very old-fashioned when it comes to debts of honour."

"Thank you, all of you." Gervais cleared his throat. "Then our next move has to be--"

"Uh, Gervais," MacLeod interrupted. "Can I make some suggestions? We have to cover our backs as best we can, buy ourselves a little time. So as far as he is concerned you've backed down. Maybe you could tell Henri to pass that along," he went on loudly as uproar broke out again, "We should all keep a low profile and find out all we can on the quiet about Carston, his crews, and his business affairs. The office computer will help us there, if you know how to hack. If no one here
does, I do. If it needs any legwork or investigations outside of Surtainville, I could deal with it. With any luck they won't expect the new guy to take a part in this, so I might not be watched so closely."

Five pairs of eyes stared at him. "That puts you in the firing line," Gervais said.

MacLeod shrugged. "Won't be the first time," he said, "and I don't have family here." Of the few people he thought of as 'family', one was almost certainly in Paris, and the other two could be anywhere on the planet.

"As of now," said Jean-Michel, dropping a heavy arm across MacLeod's shoulders, "you do."

MacLeod nodded, suddenly speechless.

"Now that's settled," Yves said loudly, glancing at his watch, "We're late for the midday session and it's a fine day out there. Grab the ball, Jean-Michel, and let's get going."

###

Toward the end of their lunch break, MacLeod tossed the rugby ball to Thierry and left the training circle. If only for a moment, he needed to be alone with his thoughts.

MacLeod wandered along the beach, just above the furthest reach of the waves. The sea was a glittering mirror for the sky, and the northeast wind leached any warmth from the sunlight. It was invigorating, the kind of weather that fired him with an urge to run just for the sheer joy of it, and the voice of an uninvited but welcome Seacouver houseguest came with it.

"Run with you? In this weather? MacLeod, it is snowing out there!" Methos sank deeper into the couch, eyes narrowed, threatening retaliation if MacLeod made a move to haul him outside by brute force. "Come with me to somewhere hot and I'll show you running--how about retracing the original Marathon? Bet you anything you like I'll run you into the ground over that road."

"Then where's the challenge?" MacLeod demanded. "C'mon, Methos! You can't tell me you survived five millennia as a couch potato."

"Close," Methos growled. "It's an ancient and noble profession, and I have a natural talent for it. Besides, when you've frozen to death and thawed out as often as I have, you'll be a little less gung ho about charging about in the white stuff. If you live that long, which at the moment is debatable."

"C'mon, Methos," MacLeod said again, and this time it was an unashamed plea. "Just to the park and back?"

"No."

"I'll buy us coffee and a danish at the--"

"No."

"But you have to keep fit," MacLeod protested.

"I am fit. Fit enough to dump you on your arse," Methos added, a demon-glint appearing in his
"Fat chance," MacLeod said, secure in his thirty-odd pounds weight advantage and his well-honed skills.

One second the man was a boneless sprawl across most of the couch, the next he had rolled off the couch and under MacLeod's instinctive block, and was at MacLeod's back. Fingers like metal rods were sinking into that certain knot of nerves and MacLeod couldn’t move. Red-hot needles attacked his limbs and his legs wouldn’t support him, let alone obey him. Methos' left arm was around his chest, holding him upright.

"Sucker," Methos drawled, his breath warm on MacLeod's cheek. "Never learn, do you? It'll be the death of you one day."

Methos' supporting arm was a band of steel around him, and MacLeod was suddenly aware of the steady rise and fall of the chest pressed to his back.

An almost silent chuckle whispered in his ear and a sharp chin rested on his shoulder. "Sucker," Methos murmured again, the word very close to an endearment.

MacLeod found he was holding his breath. His pulse had speeded up and when the pressure on his nerve centre was released he didn’t move away. Didn’t want to, he discovered.

Then the sharp resonance of another immortal separated them. MacLeod snatched up his katana, Methos put the couch and MacLeod between himself and the newcomer, and the moment was lost.

The elevator crawled up to the loft and its gate bounced open. "Hi, Mac." Richie Ryan came in with something of a swagger to his shoulders. "Hi, Adam. Still here?"

If Richie hadn’t chosen that moment to arrive, what might have happened? Nor was it the first time they had been poised on the brink of--something, and once again MacLeod had to reassess exactly what Methos meant to him. Friend, yes, and perhaps with the potential to be so much more, if Methos wanted it and wasn’t just putting on the moves to yank his chain.

But what did he himself want? He’d taken a few male lovers over the centuries, but Methos was… different. This man had lived for over five thousand years. Yes, Methos was all-too human most of the time, but when it came down to it, MacLeod knew himself to be a child beside that vast stretch of time and experience. Regardless of what he, MacLeod, might want, why the hell would Methos want to do anything more than tease?

MacLeod sighed. More and more frequently, the man was in his thoughts, an absence in his days and evenings. Surrounded by people who had fast become close friends, there was one face he needed to see, one voice he needed to hear.

Then the assassin-thought slipped into MacLeod's head; was Methos still alive? Had that ancient life been ended? Five years was a long time to be away from the mainstream; they could all be dead, Joe and Amanda as well, while he was away searching like a spoilt child for answers that didn’t exist.

Time was a precious gift, and he had wasted so much of it. Immortal lives were fragile threads when sword-blades were drawn, more so than a mortal's three score years and ten. As soon as this Carston situation was concluded, he would go to Paris and find the all-important answers.
Gervais yawned and stretched as much as he was able in the cramped confines of MacLeod's Citroen, willing the man to hurry up as he watched him fumble at the padlock and chain. At the end of the day, the temperature was dropping past freezing, and that was almost certainly contributing to MacLeod's slowness. But Gervais wanted to be back at the farmhouse with a healthy portion of his grandmother's cassoulet inside him.

The flash of headlights in the mirror caught his attention and he glanced up to see a large van pull in close behind him. That set his instincts on alert and another look showed him the reflection of the van's driver. He swore and got out of the car, walked quickly to MacLeod's side.

"We could have trouble," he said. "Carston's men have just turned up and I doubt they want a friendly chat."

"Damn," MacLeod said quietly.

Gervais took out his cell phone and punched in numbers. "It's an emergency callout text code," he said. "Jean-Michel will contact the others and they'll be here as soon as they can make it. He'll also call the Police."

"We can put the gate between the muscle and us," MacLeod said.

"No, keep it locked. I don't want to give them a chance to get inside and wreck the place." Which could well happen, given that it was a case of six on two. Gervais had no idea how good MacLeod might be at karate. He knew from the lunchtime beach sessions that the man was strong, very fast and supple as an eel, but in a real fight situation? That could well be a different matter. For himself, well, his work boots had steel toecaps, and with his car keys clenched in his right fist so that the business ends jutted out past his fingers, he had an effective knuckleduster. It wouldn't be the first brawl he'd been in, but he hadn't been so badly outnumbered before.

Six men climbed out of the van and spread out in an arc. "The two on the left are part of the Halcyon's crew," Gervais went on. "Patric Theroux, wearing the white cap, Captain of the Ariadne. He's a thug. I don't know the other three. This could be messy."

Theroux stepped forward. "Gervais Dubosc," he said loudly. "We want to take a look around. Our boss is thinking of sending some business your way."

"My order book's full," Gervais said. "For the foreseeable future."

"Then we'll have to clear it for you," Theroux said cheerfully.

"I don't want any business Carston is handing out," Gervais said coolly.

Theroux nodded, as if he had expected no less. "The word will be going around that the Dubosc yard's a bad risk these days. So we're here to start the ball rolling."

"I don't think so," Gervais said. "Get out, now. I've called the Police Judiciaire."

"What good will they do?" Theroux jeered. "By the time they get here, it'll be too late for you." He took his hands out of his pockets and steel knuckledusters glinted in the streetlights. "You've been poking your nose into things that don't concern you, so we'll just rearrange that nose to remind you to stay away from The Lanterns and keep your mouth shut."
MacLeod was moving, a slow, balanced glide that brought him to stand between Gervais and Theroux. The Captain gave a feral sneer and motioned one of his men forward: a tall, heavyset ash-blond with a cleft chin in a square jaw. He looked like a crop-haired Viking.

"Sven Anders," Gervais said quietly, for MacLeod's ears only. "Be careful. Fancies himself as a wrestler."

Anders took a couple of steps toward MacLeod, stance solid, centre of gravity kept low. Like Theroux, his hands were bright with knuckledusters.

"Thanks for the warning," MacLeod said, eyes unwaveringly on the big Swede.

No one moved. Gervais began to hope it was a bluff and Theroux would call his men off.

Then Anders bellowed and charged like a Sumo wrestler. Still no one else joined in. It was as if Anders had been elected the official executioner, and they were waiting to see how soon the blood would flow.

MacLeod seemed to drift out of the way and his foot came up to impact hard in the man's belly. Anders staggered but didn't go down. He turned and lashed out with metal-covered fists. MacLeod blocked the blows and moved in close, the heels of his hands striking a rapid series of blows to Anders' upper chest and head. They didn't look to have much force behind them, but Anders lurched back, staggered, and dropped to one knee, gasping for breath. MacLeod bounded away, agile as a panther, and crouched, waiting.

The Swede launched himself forward, spun and kicked. MacLeod snatched his heel, lifted the kick higher. Then he scythed Anders' other leg out from under him and the big man went down like a felled tree. Anders rolled to his feet, fast despite his bulk, and came forward again, arms outstretched. MacLeod took two running steps and leapt high in the air, feet snapping out to land viciously hard kicks to Anders' jaw and chest. Anders dropped, and stayed down.

Even before the Swede had hit the floor, MacLeod was moving in on Theroux. The captain swung a roundhouse punch that MacLeod turned aside with a knife-edge slash of his hand. Gervais heard the bones break from where he stood, and Theroux screamed. The heel of the other palm smashed into Theroux's face, sending him flying to land on his back.

Two men closed in on Gervais, while another pair backed away from MacLeod's advance. MacLeod let them go, spun round and took out the knee of one of Gervais' opponents with a lightning-fast kick to the kneecap, and the others began to circle him.

A motorcycle appeared, skidding round the corner with its engine howling like a banshee. Matthieu braked at the last moment and threw the bike over, rolling free as it slid into Carston's men. The roll became a crouch and he hurled himself at the nearest opponent, bringing the man down in a flying tackle.

Gervais leaped back as his current opposition was scattered by the motorcycle, ducked under another swinging fist and punched hard into the man's stomach.

"Go!" Theroux howled, staggering to his feet. "Move out!"

"Let them go!" Gervais yelled as MacLeod dumped Theroux on his ass again. Obediently MacLeod stepped back to stand at his side, settling into the formal guard stance that was a warning in itself, and Matthieu got to his feet, sending his victim on his way with a hefty kick to the backside.
Theroux and his men retreated at a shambling run, piled into the van and took off just as Jean-
Michel arrived, closely followed by Thierry.

From beginning to end, the brawl had taken scant minutes, and Gervais drew in a shaky breath. A
dull pain in one shoulder began to make itself felt, his knuckles were sore and something warm
was trickling from his left eyebrow. But he couldn't remember getting hit. Then he recalled
MacLeod's contribution to the melee. He turned to the man, put right fist into left palm and bowed
as André Roussel had taught him years ago. "Sensei," he said humbly, which was all he could
remember of the formality.

###

"Well?" Carston demanded. The bruises on Theroux's face and the sling on his left arm didn’t
auger well.

"Stand-off," Theroux said. "Dubosc always used to close up the yard on his own, but he wasn't
alone this time. He's got another Bouvin working for him, by the look of him, and the man's a
fucking animal. Moves like one as well. He's one of those martial art freaks, and he took Anders
down like he was a school kid. Then he started on me. Matthieu Bouvin showed up and ran his
motorbike into us and this new bastard broke Jacques' leg--it was a bloody shambles, thanks to
those fucking Bouvins."

"I see," Carston said grimly. "Three men routed six. What do I pay you all for, hmm? But Dubosc
won't get away with it. As soon as I get that bloody house, they are all history."

###

No one on Gervais' workforce was skilled in the more esoteric side of computer-work. So
MacLeod began to spend the afternoon of each working day in the small office crouched over the
computer, going online to search out Jack Carston.

It was something he was quietly competent at, while acknowledging he wasn’t in the same echelon
as Methos. He'd always found it nicely ironic that someone who was possibly the oldest living
creature on the planet was also among the more skilled at internet trickery. Methos. Damn it, he'd
give almost anything to have the sarcastic bastard right there now working alongside him. He
swore as the connection crashed once more.

Gervais looked up from his desk. "Not again?" he sighed. "I guess it's just not up to the job, is it?"

"Right," MacLeod said through gritted teeth. "You've invested in the latest global positioning
systems for your boats, but went for economy on your computer hardware."

"Yes, well, I didn't expect to have to use it for anything other than accounts, stock orders and
banking," Gervais muttered.

"This is a little out of the ordinary." MacLeod grinned as an idea occurred to him. "Would you
have any objection if I was to bring in my own laptop and modem?" He didn't actually have one
yet, but that could be rectified very quickly. "I could network yours through mine, that way you get the full advantage and we can use them both at the same time. What do you say?" It also meant he could set up a maze of firewalls that would keep any hostile out of Gervais' system, just in case Carston had plans in that direction.

"Okay, Sensei," Gervais decided. "Go for it."

MacLeod suppressed a sigh. The new nickname showed every sign of sticking and the trouble was, they were only half-joking when they used it. "You'll need to upgrade your connection," he warned.

Gervais shrugged. "It needs doing," he said. "See to it. You are now officially Head of Dubosc & Son's Computer Department. Just don't use up what little profit I made this year."

"Trust me," MacLeod chuckled. He reached for his coat. "In that case, I'll get things moving right now. I'll be back before lunch."

###

From investigating Carston's business interests, MacLeod went on to his boats and plotted their various movements and ports of call. The man owned four, ranging from the Ariadne, a big ocean-going cruise yacht that was the last word in luxury, to the Danae, a small, two-crewed racing yacht. The Halcyon, the boat most often seen around their area, was another luxury item, with two state cabins and berths for a four-man crew, if she was being sailed under canvas. Under engine power, a single man could sail her. She would also be able to get into the Lanterns' bay at high tide and a calm sea, with a knowledgeable head and a steady pair of hands taking her in.

That Carston had been using the bay and house on an irregular basis over a period of time, and now suddenly wanted to buy it, suggested the man was planning a substantial upturn in business. Was it a coincidence that the Ariadne spent a lot of time cruising round the eastern Adriatic and the eastern Aegean, going as far as the Marmian Sea and through to the Black Sea? There were still some high-powered war-criminals the UN would like to talk to, men who would pay very good money for the chance of a new identity and new life anywhere else on the planet.
Chapter 8

Carston didn’t slam the phone down, though he wanted to hurl it across his office. Mrs. de Carteret was still not strong enough for visitors. Her chest infection was under control but she was very frail. Fuck it, he wanted that house deal sewn up tight. The old bitch had to be fit enough to sign contracts soon or his plans would have to be put on a very expensive hold. Oh, sure, if she died, kinless as she was, the Normandy house would be put up for auction. He’d get it then, but that could take months. Using it on an infrequent basis as he had been doing was fine, but the regular runs he’d planned needed the frequent and unquestionable access of an owner.

Power of attorney. Maybe that was the key. He picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Henri," he drawled. "I've got some sad news for you."

"Monsieur?" There was a satisfying quiver to the man's voice.

"Your old lady is sick. I think you should come over here and visit her."

"But—"

"No buts, Henri. It could be she is so sick she isn't able to manage her affairs. Perhaps power of attorney should be signed over to you as an old and trusted family friend. Talk to her. Persuade her."

"But if she refuses--"

"Make sure she doesn't. Your daughter, Simone, she's a pretty girl. I'm sure you can be very persuasive, can't you, Henri?"

"Yes, monsieur." It was no more than a croaking whisper, and Carston was laughing as he cut the connection.

###

Henri managed to get to the small bathroom behind his office just in time. He crouched over the toilet bowl, the taste of vomit bitter in his mouth, and it suddenly came to him that he couldn’t take it any more. But Simone had to be protected. That, above all else, had to be his goal.

He knew what he had to do; it was there, in his head, as if waiting for this moment and Henri embraced it with the fervor of a drowning man clutching a lifeline.

Since he didn’t want to involve Gervais more than he was already, Henri didn’t have many options open to him. The only other way to get to the Channel Islands at this time of the year was to drive down to Granville for the ferry; he checked the sailing times, then phoned Paul Draycott at the nursing home. All was on track and the contracts were being drawn up at this moment. Tomorrow at nine o’clock Mr. MacLeod and Madame would sign them and all would be settled.

The relief was almost overwhelming. "Then I will come and see Madame today," he said. "She is well, isn't she?"
"Oh, yes. Better than she has been for some time. Her Mr. MacLeod and this intrigue have been a real tonic."

"I'm glad to hear it." More than glad, exonerated.

After some commonplace courtesies, he ended the call, dropped the keys to the House of the Lanterns into his briefcase and closed up the shop. He had a lot of writing to do, but that could wait until he was on the ferry. The last thing he did just before he left was phone Jack Carston's office and leave a message to say he was on his way to St Helier, that his appointment with Madame was for the next day, but that he would be talking to her doctor to assess her mental condition this afternoon. Time, just buying time.

Dominique de Carteret always reminded Henri of a Dresden figurine: tiny, delicate and fragile, white hair immaculate, a froth of lace at her throat or draped about her shoulders. Today there was an added sparkle to her eyes, though it dimmed for a moment when he was shown into her sitting-room.

"Henri Pasquier!" she exclaimed, holding out both hands to him. "It is so good to see you!" She didn't say he looked dreadful, he knew he did and that she was shocked by his appearance.

"It's good to see you, M'dame, and looking so well." He smiled, kissed her fingers before releasing them and sat on the couch facing her.

"I wish I could say the same to you. Henri, what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing, M'dame. I have been ill, but I'm better now."

"I'm relieved to hear it. Henri, thank you for sending me my M'sieur MacLeod. He is a treasure. You will be here for the signing, tomorrow?"

"I'm glad you like him. He struck me as being a good man, and I know Margot and Gaspard Dubosc think very highly of him." He paused and smiled at her. "I'm sorry, but I won't be able to make it tomorrow, which is why I am here today. I have brought you the keys. I thought you'd like to hand them over yourself."

"Thank you. Yes, I would. I know I'll never see the place again, nor M'sieur MacLeod after tomorrow, but I want to give him the keys from my own hand. A symbolic thing, you understand."

"Of course." He opened his briefcase and took out the keys on their old-fashioned ring, placed them in her two hands. "I cannot tell you how pleased I am that things have worked out so well, M'dame. There have been times when I despaired of finding the right buyer."

"Me, too." She gave a chuckle. "When you phoned to make that urgent appointment for M'sieur MacLeod, I so very nearly said no, take it off the market altogether, I've changed my mind about selling. But enough of that. Tell me about Simone. Has she found herself a young man yet? If not, you should introduce her to my M'sieur MacLeod, if you haven't already done so."

He laughed, and shook his head. "Time enough for that when she's finished her studies," he said, and the next half hour was spent discussing his favorite topic: Simone. Then, regretfully, Henri glanced at his watch and stood up. "I must go, M'dame," he said. "I have a ferry to catch. Goodbye."

"So soon? Isn't there a later one?"
"No, I'm afraid not." He kissed her hand again, and left, a lightness to his step that hadn't been there when he arrived.

It was full dark by the time Henri drove through Surtainville. He made a brief detour to the boatyard, dropped an envelope into the yard's letterbox and drove on to Flamanville and the small garage he rented by his estate office.

###

That day had begun more auspiciously in the Dubosc household. The kitchen was fragrant with coffee and fresh-baked bread, the table was laid for breakfast, and Gaspard was in his usual chair, buttering croissants. Gervais and MacLeod came in, shoving elbows and arguing rugby. Margot Dubosc was waiting for them, a grim expression on her face and their banter died a sudden death.

"Duncan," she said. "Sit. We are going to have a talk."

"Yes, Grand-mère?" He smiled, obeying her with wariness in his eyes. Gervais groaned and started to edge surreptitiously back toward the door. He stopped as Margot carried on speaking.

"Duncan, you are practically part of my family, so I am going to speak frankly and don't be offended."

"Grand-mère?" Gervais growled. "What--"

"Be quiet, you."

"You won't offend me, Grand-mère," MacLeod said cautiously.

"Good," she said, and sat beside him, taking one of his hands in hers. "Duncan, that house is thousands of euros, and tomorrow you're buying it to block a bully. Are you sure you want to go through with this? Can you afford to go through with this?"

"Grand-mère!" It was more of a snarl this time, from Gervais.

"Be quiet! Didn't I say the same to you when you and Madeleine wanted to buy that fallen-down barn of a place in Surtainville? And aren't you glad because now you have that beautiful little house in Flamanville to go back to when all this is over? So, Duncan, have you really thought this through?"

"Yes, Grand-mère." He fished the much-folded brochure out of his pocket, spread it out on the table. The photos that illustrated it had been taken in summer. Colors and light glowed in the stained glass windows, shone from the great skylights and glittered off the three lanterns that gave the place its name. "Okay, the first idea was to take it away from Carston, but not any more. I want to live there, make it a home again." The kind of home he hadn't had for a long time, maybe since Tessa had died. Quickly he ran through his plans for the redecoration, the major refurbishments. "If I need more funds, I have some antiques in storage in Paris I can sell. Money isn’t the issue. You have made me welcome here, part of the community, Grand-mère, and I want to stay."

Margot gave one sharp nod. "That's settled then." Her face relaxed into a smile and she patted his hand before releasing it. "Now eat your breakfast. Since you have so much money to throw away, I think you should buy yourself some decent clothes for tomorrow, so you don't have to borrow
Matthieu's again.

"I'm glad you're going to be sticking around," Gervais said, feet braced on the dashboard, cigarette filling the car with pungent smoke. "Now we can really get to work on fitting you into the team. Are you happy to be on the wing? Or do you fancy having a go at another position?"

MacLeod laughed and shook his head. "What if I told you I didn't like rugby and had no intention of playing it?"

"I'd call you a liar to your face," Gervais grinned. "Duncan, what belt do you have in karate?"

"Black," he said. "Why?"

"Of course you do. Stupid question, really. Some of us did karate at college, but that was ten years ago, for me and Jean-Michel. We'd like to start training again. I've been meaning to ask you for a while; how would you feel about taking on some students?"

"Does this have anything to do with Carston?"

"Well, yes."

"In that case, no. I can't turn you into the Karate Kid overnight, and a little knowledge is worse than no knowledge at all."

"How about in the long term? As a team we're fast and we're strong, but a lot of us are built for solid muscle, not suppleness. Personally, I'd like to take it up again, and I know some of the others do. Jean-Michel and Matthieu for sure."

"I'll think about it." MacLeod smiled. "But if I do, I'll be teaching more than the physical form. There's a very deep and ancient philosophy behind the martial arts that's as important, if not more so, than the fancy kicks."

"Fine by me," Gervais said, and took a deep drag on his cigarette.

"You can start off with T'ai Chi any time you want," MacLeod went on. "It's a good introduction to the hard forms."

"That's what old people do in parks, in China." Gervais sat up. "I've seen it on the TV. It's a martial art?" He sounded incredulous.

MacLeod's smile became wry. "Oh, yes."

"Okay." He rolled down the window and flicked his cigarette out into the rain. "You'd better do what Grand-mère said, this morning," he went on, changing the subject completely. "There's some good menswear stores in town. Take a long lunch-hour, see what you can find."

"Yes, Boss." MacLeod grinned. "In fact, meet me for lunch somewhere. I've got a business proposition for you."

"In that case, I can put it down on my tax returns. The Auberge Fleurie on the Rue de la Fontaine, twelve-thirty. What have you got in mind?"

"An investment."
Gervais dug and needled all the way to the boatyard, but could get no more information out of him.

Because such things are treated with due seriousness in France, the two men didn’t talk business until after the meal.

"You mentioned an investment," Gervais said, pouring them both second cups of fine coffee.

"Yes. Dubosc & Son has good prospects. I'd like to put some capital into it."

There was a pause while Gervais collected his thoughts. "As a partner?"

"No. Mechanic and Head of the Computer Department is enough for me," he added with a grin. "It'd be purely on a profit-sharing basis. Everything rests with you; policy, decisions, whatever. All I'll do is put up the cash to cover the plans you talked about when we first met, plus enough to pay off the existing mortgage, and in return I take a percentage of the profits."

Jaw slack, Gervais stared at him. It was a few seconds before he found his voice. "Duncan," he said, "how rich are you?"

"Enough for this. Just. Think about it, talk it over with your wife and Grand-mère, and whoever your legal adviser is, and let me know."

A grin spread slowly across Gervais' face, and he raised his coffee cup in a toast. "I'll do that," he said.

"Great, and while you're in a good mood, can I extend the long lunch-hour into the afternoon as well? We've kept a low profile for a while now, so I think I can take a chance. I want to go over The Lanterns with a flashlight and a fine-toothed comb. If illegals were being housed there for any length of time, the ground floor rooms would be where they'd stay. The upper rooms are out because of the skylights. They're unsullered, and any light could be seen from half of Normandy and clear across to the Channel Islands." He pulled out the brochure, opened it to the ground-floor plan. "There's the huge double garage in the middle, and at each side these two big rooms marked up as a laundry room and a studio workshop. There's this small room off the laundry room that's supposed to have a toilet and sink in it. If those window and door shutters are as good as the ones on the upper floors, no light will get out and there's floor space for a small army."

"I'm convinced. Go for it. Want a second pair of eyes?" Gervais added hopefully.

MacLeod smiled. "Sure," he said.

"Great." Gervais' grin was one of wolfish delight. "Okay, Sensei. As well as Head of Computing, you are now Chief of Security, but don't expect a pay rise."

"You've got a deal," MacLeod said, and they shook hands with due solemnity.

The stairs were wide and would normally have been well lit; their flashlights showed ceiling lights at frequent intervals. At the bottom of the stairs was a spacious back hall, doors opening off into the designated studio-workshop, the garages and the laundry room with the washroom off it. All were empty, though the signs of occupation were clear enough.

"Sleeping bags were laid out here," MacLeod said, crouching to examine scuffs in the dust on the
workshop floor. "Five."

"That'd be about right, if they came in on the Halcyon. She has berths for six, including one man to sail her under power. If he's good enough to get her into the bay without holing her. Tut-tut. Smoking in bed," Gervais added, pushing his flashlight at some flattened stubs. Fastidiously he picked one up, sniffed it and squinted at the faint not quite burned away logo on the paper. "Bogatyri?" he read, frowning his puzzlement.

"That's a Russian brand," MacLeod said.

"How about this one?" Gervais asked, investigating another.

"Algerian," MacLeod said, checking it out. "We'll take these two for evidence. Added weight for your report to your friend in the Police Judiciaire."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. This is a studio workshop? What for?" His flashlight splashed light over workbenches, brought a dull gleam to the dirty panes of the patio doors and wide shuttered window.

"Madame designed and made stained glass," MacLeod said. "All the windows have something of hers in them, she says. I'd like to open up all these shutters, let the light through them again."

"After tomorrow, you can," Gervais smiled.
But MacLeod shook his head. "Not until Carston is out of the picture," he said.

"Good point. So what will you do with this room?"

"Gut it, paint it pale sand, put in a cedar-wood parquet floor and turn it into a dojo."

Gervais whistled and shook his head, grinning. "A dojo! That's a hell of an idea, and the last thing I'd've thought of. But then the martial arts aren't just a sport to you, are they?"

"No," MacLeod said quietly.

They investigated the garages and found the main power switches there, then investigated the laundry room and the small washroom off it, found more evidence of occupation. Stale cooking smells hung in the still air, a black plastic sack full of cans and old newspapers was shoved in a corner, while the washroom stank of urine.

"Not exactly housetrained," Gervais commented. "But at least nothing appears to be damaged. There's a lot here if a forensic team wants to play. Okay. Tomorrow we'll get all our information consolidated into a coherent report and I'll get in touch with André in Rouen."

"Tomorrow morning I'm in St Helier," MacLeod reminded him.

"I hadn't forgotten." Gervais grinned and slapped him on the back. "When you get back will be soon enough."

###

Early on a frost-wrapped day, Gervais opened up the boatyard gate for MacLeod to drive in. They
were the first there, though as Gervais unlocked the office, Matthieu's motorcycle pulled into the
yard and parked beside the Citroen.

"Hey, Sensei, ready for the big ceremony?" Matthieu grinned as he followed them into the relative
warmth of the office.

"Yes, and in my own clothes." MacLeod smiled, opening his work jacket to show a chestnut brown
silk-knit sweater similar in style to the one Matthieu had loaned him, and black pants. He handed
over the borrowed clothes, dry-cleaned and wrapped around a bottle of red wine. "Thanks,
Matthieu. Any time I can return the favor, just shout."

"Duncan," Gervais said over Matthieu's enthusiastic appreciation of the wine, "if you want to be at
the nursing home by nine o'clock, you're going to have to move. Want a crew for the speedboat?"

MacLeod shook his head. "No need," he said, "but thanks. I'll see you guys later." He grabbed a set
of waterproof clothing and headed out the door.

"Pity." Matthieu sighed. "I wouldn't have minded a morning in St Helier. Be interesting to see if the
Halcyon is moored up in the harbor over there."

"Duncan will be checking that out," Gervais said. "Matthieu, I'm going out for a while. When the
others get here, tell them I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Okay, boss."

'Think it over,' MacLeod had said. Gervais had done that. Yesterday he'd spent a couple of hours
on the phone to Madeleine, but had little opportunity to talk it over with Margot and Gaspard
Dubosc. Now would be as good a time as any.

The day was eye-smartingly cold, the sun glittered off frosted walls and cobbles and roof-tiles, but
there was a hint of warmth in the brightness. He found his grandmother hanging washing on the
line that stretched between the two barns. "Where's Grand-père?" he asked, picking up one of his
shirts from the laundry basket and handing it to her.

"Mending the fence at the top orchard. Why?"

"I want to talk to you both. Duncan has made me a business proposition and Madeleine has left the
decision up to me."

"Huh." Margot took the shirt and pegged it to the line. "So start with talking to me. What has
Duncan said?"

"That he wants to invest some money in the boatyard." Briefly he explained the deal offered, while
Margot continued to hang out the last of the washing, a frown on her face.

"The house and now this," she said. "I think that young man has more money than sense. What do
you want me to say? You've already made up your mind."

"Not necessarily. I'd like your opinion, Grand-mère."

"Then we'll go back inside and I'll make us some coffee," she said. "Bring the basket."

Gervais trailed along behind her, a fond smile on his mouth. She wasn't tall, but she was a sturdy
figure in her usual black dress, white hair braided and wound into a tight bun at the back of her head. Indomitable was the word that always sprang to mind when he thought of her.

"So," Margot said, setting coffee mugs on the table. "Do you have any doubts at all?"

"Only about whether or not he could afford it. He says he can. Just. Him, I don't doubt at all. I've only known the man for a short time. I know very little about him, other than he's been in the military, probably Special Services, and that he knows boats and lived in Paris for years. But I feel like--" He broke off and shrugged. "Like he's one of the family and I've known him all my life."

Margot nodded her agreement. "He was wounded when he first came here," she said, "but he's healing. His sadness is still there but not so close to the surface, I think. As if things are beginning to work out for him at last. He needs a home, and he needs a family, while you have a good business head. That is all I have to say, any decision is yours to make. Just make sure it's the right one."

"Yes, Grand-mère," he said dutifully, a grin spreading.

Gervais returned to the boatyard, his head full of pie-in-the-sky plans that suddenly were within reach. All they needed now was to get Carston off their backs and the future would be looking pretty damned good. Duncan was right. Given Carston's overt threats and what he and Duncan had discovered at the house, it was time to have a talk with André Roussel.

There was a pile of mail waiting for him on his desk, and on the top was one envelope that had only his name on it. Frowning, he picked it up, slit it open and unfolded the contents. It was handwritten, dated yesterday, and was from Henri Pasquier.

Dear Gervais,

I have done what I can to protect Simone, you, Madeleine and little Philippe, and Dominique de Carteret. I've told Carston that I arranged the sale of the house, that none of you know the buyer, least of all that frail old lady. All I ask of you is that you honor this request. I've put with this note a copy of a detailed statement of all that I know of Jack Carston and his operations. It's enough to form the basis of a successful Police operation, if not enough on its own to charge and prosecute. But I beg you, keep it safe and do nothing with it, unless anything happens to Simone, or anyone else in our family. The original is with a lawyer, and a copy is also with my bank manager, with the same instructions. I've told Carston this, and what will happen if he harms any of you. It's the best insurance I could think of for the safety of you all.

Please explain to Simone for me. I will have a note with me for her, but the Police will see it as well, so I couldn't say all that I want to say in it.

I love you all, and this is the only way I can keep everyone safe from that evil man.

Gervais stared at the paper in his hand until the lines blurred. Disbelief and shock churned in his stomach, and he barely registered that the phone was ringing. Yves came into the office, reached across him and took the call.

"Boss?" the mechanic said after a moment. "Gervais? It's the Police Judiciaire for you."

###
The message on Carston's office voice-mail was timed at eight thirty-four the previous evening. Frowning, he hit the play-button. Henri Pasquier's voice sounded tired but calm, almost serene, and Carston's frown became a scowl.

"I will not let you terrorize me any more. Nor can I let you threaten my daughter or anyone else in my family. But I know that I am a weak man, and you have coerced me in the past, so I am placing myself out of your reach. I have planned over and over again to kill you, but I know I do not have the courage to do that, and it would hurt my girl to know her father is a murderer, no matter what the provocation is. This is by far the best way.

"The House of the Lanterns is beyond your reach. I arranged the sale, and everything has gone through. Madame de Carteret has no idea who has bought it. Neither do any of my family and friends.

"I have written a detailed statement of all that I know of your smuggling drugs and criminals through the House of the Lanterns. I have listed names, dates, boats, routes, everything, and believe me, it is enough to send you to prison for a very long time.

"This statement is lodged with a bank and copies are with a lawyer. Both have instructions that if anything happens to my daughter, to my nephew, to any of my family, be it an accident or not, be it fatal or not, then the statement will be immediately forwarded to the Police Judiciaire.

"Leave my family alone, Jack Carston."

Carston deleted the call, and sat in silence for a moment, lips thinned to a furious line.

"Maybe," he said eventually. Time to cut his losses, temporarily, make other arrangements. He smiled. "Then again, maybe not." When the dust had settled, he'd spend some time settling scores.
"He's late," Alice said nervously. "Madame, what if--"

"Hush, don't be silly," Dominique said with a smile. "M'sieur Draycott is meeting him at the harbor. He's coming in a small boat from Surtainville, don't forget, and the weather isn't the best it could be. Everything will be fine."

"Nurse Paton said That Man phoned again today," the girl muttered.

"Yes, I know, and Janet told him I'd had a relapse and couldn't possibly have any visitors for the foreseeable future. Don't worry about Mr. Carston, my dear. I have a feeling our M'sieur MacLeod can deal with him if the need arises."

"But, what--"

"Mrs. de Carteret." Janet Paton put her head round the door of the sitting-room. "Mr. Draycott has just phoned. He and Mr. MacLeod will be here in about fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Janet." Dominique sat a little straighter in her wheelchair, pleased delight giving her renewed energy. "You see." She chuckled, patting Alice's hand. "I told you so. Now, M'sieur MacLeod has had a cold journey, and I'm sure he'll welcome a hot cup of tea when he arrives."

"I'll see to it right away, Madame. And cakes, yes?"

"Of course," she said, laughing. The girl left the room with what might almost be a skip to her steps. Dominique laughed again and envied Alice her youth.

Perhaps she had dozed for a time; a gentle hand on her arm roused her. "Madame," Alice whispered. "He's here. Shall I bring in the tea?"

"Yes, please, dear." Dominique straightened, irritated that her body had betrayed her, if only for a short while. The few moments it took for Alice to go to the door and open it were all she needed to collect herself, and she greeted him with a welcoming smile. The smile grew a little as she took in the subtle change in him. The vitality that had been hidden behind barriers of sorrow was more to the fore now, and she rejoiced to see it. "M'sieur MacLeod," she said, "it is so good to see you again."

"The feeling's mutual, Ma Dame." He smiled, and took her hand, bowing over it with the courtesy that seemed a natural part of him and not an affectation. "You would honour me, Ma Dame, if you called me Duncan."

"Thank you. I'll be glad to. Well, Duncan, Henri came over yesterday and brought the keys, so I can hand them over to you myself with all due ceremony." But it would be a wrench. The final relinquishing of her own past. Something in her throat swelled and stopped her voice for a short moment.

"Ma Dame," MacLeod said carefully, "would it hurt you to see the changes I'd make to your home?"

"Hurt? No, of course not," she said quickly. "Well, perhaps, a little, but that would be just my foolishness. All things change, Duncan. That's a fact of life."
"Then it wouldn’t grieve you if I was to invite you over every now and then, to see for yourself how things are progressing?"

Dominique raised a hand to her mouth, stunned and afraid and delighted. It had been nearly eight years since she had last gone outside the nursing home and its grounds. "I would like to do that," she managed, in a voice not much above a whisper.

Beside her, Janet made a small sound of protest. "But--"

"Nurse Paton and Alice are invited as well, of course," he added in English, meeting Janet's gaze with that warm, devastating smile.

"Duncan, I am ninety-eight years old. I might not--"

"All the more reason," he said with gentle callousness, "to do what you wish to do, to go where you wish to go. You'll be well cared for."

"That I don't doubt. Thank you, Duncan, I will be pleased to accept your invitation, whenever you wish to offer it." She glanced up at Janet, and chuckled at the nurse's scarlet cheeks and shocked expression. "I know Alice will be thrilled speechless," she continued, and changed to English, "but how about you, Janet? Are you ready for a little adventure?"

Janet flushed even more and nodded. "Yes," she said. "I mean, there should be someone from the staff with you, just in case, and Alice has no medical training--" She faltered, and was rescued by the entrance of Draycott and his secretary.

While the lawyer was sorting out his papers, Dominique took MacLeod's hand and brought him closer. "You," she murmured, too quietly for anyone else to hear, "are a very wicked man. Poor Janet!"

"Ma Dame?" he said, deep eyes guileless.

"Don't play the innocent with me, young man! You could seduce a nun out of her panties and you know it! Behave." But she was smiling as she said it. To see his shadows pushed far enough back to allow him to tease the nurse, if only a little, gladdened her.

"Yes, Ma Dame," he said meekly.

"Good morning, Madame, everyone," Draycott said, his beaming smile spread around the room. "Shall we begin? These are the contracts, both are to be signed, witnessed and exchanged, and that's that. Madame, I must ask you this, and I know Mr. MacLeod will not hold it against me. Are you sure you wish to go ahead with the sale?"

"Very sure," Dominique said without any hesitation at all. "Just show me where to sign."

She wrote her name with a flourish, watched MacLeod sign his, then Janet and the secretary as the witnesses. That was it. The House of the Lanterns was now no longer hers. Oddly enough, it didn’t hurt as much as she thought it would. "A new beginning," Dominique said, "for both of us, perhaps." He nodded, but didn't speak. He held the sheet of paper as if it was fragile and might crumble into dust at any moment. "Duncan," she said, and repeated his name until he looked up and met her eyes. "Duncan, you will be happy there," she promised, "more so than you've been for a long time, I think. It's a very special place, with its own kind of tranquility." The house-keys had been wedged between her hip and the side of her wheelchair. She brought them out, took his hand and folded the keys into his palm. "It's your place now. Let it heal you," she added in a whisper for his ears only.
Before he could speak, Alice appeared in the doorway. "M'sieur MacLeod," she said, "There's a phone call for you in M'sieur Draycott's office." He followed her out, but was only gone for a few minutes. When he returned with Alice on his heels, Dominique could sense a change in him, though his expression was the same as when he'd left. Now there was a dangerous anger behind the smiling façade.

"I have to go back to Surtainville, Ma Dame," he said. "I wish I could stay longer, but something has come up."

"What has happened?" she demanded.

"Ma Dame," he began, but she cut him off with an abrupt gesture.

"Duncan MacLeod, I may be very old, but I am not yet senile! Moreover, not so many days ago you told me I was tempered steel!"

He acknowledged that with a rueful smile, and sat on the couch again, leaned forward and took her hands in his. More than before, she felt his vitality, felt his grim determination as well.

"In that case," he said gently, "I have some bad news for you. You've known Henri Pasquier a long time?"

"All his life," she said quietly, suddenly knowing what he was about to say.

"Ma Dame, he died last night. I'm sorry."

"How?" she asked over startled gasps from Draycott and Janet, and Alice's squeak of shock.

"He's been under a lot of pressure, and couldn't handle it any more. He took his own life."

Dominique freed her hand long enough to cross herself, then caught his fingers again. "Jack Carston," she said.

"Yes."

"Poor man. Poor Simone--" Tears flooded her eyes, and for a moment it was as if he had wrapped her in a warm, comforting embrace, though their hands were still joined. "Duncan, Carston must be stopped."

"He will be, Ma Dame. That is what Gervais and I will be discussing. I have to go now, but I'll let you know what happens, and how it ends. If he comes here, don't see him. If he phones, don't speak to him. He'll want to pressure you to sell to him."

"Hah! What can he threaten me with?" she demanded fiercely. "Death? I'll laugh in his face!"

"Madame de Carteret," Draycott pleaded, "please! Mr. MacLeod, don't worry. He won't get past the front door, I promise you."

"Duncan." Dominique tightened her grip as he stood up to leave. "Take care." It was an order, not a plea, and he was smiling as he leaned down and kissed her hand.

"I will," he said, and was gone, taking the brightness of the day with him.

###
With the aid of a following wind, MacLeod made it back to Surtainville a lot faster than the outward journey. Four angry men waited for him in the office, and Yves handed him the wad of papers Henri had sent to Gervais.

"The boss said you're to read those," Yves said, a growl in his voice. "He's with the Police Judiciaire in Flamanville, at Henri's garage. He doesn't know when he'll be back. They'll want him to go with them when they tell Simone."

MacLeod nodded, then swore as he read Henri's covering letter. "Shit! This is a real Devil's bargain! Henri's had a damn good try at tying our hands!"

"Yes." Jean-Michel kicked the filing cabinet hard enough to dent the metal drawer. "So now what? Gervais said the Pasquier's and the Duboscs are going to talk it over, and we're to do nothing until he gets back. But we can't just leave it like this, regardless of what Henri wanted! We have to do something!"

"He'll try to secure the house," Thierry said.

"He can't." MacLeod held up the Lanterns key ring. "It's mine, and he can't get to Ma Dame. The staff at the home have closed ranks around her."

"Good." Yves looked at their faces, one by one. "Now we get back to work and carry on until the Boss gets here. No buts," he continued, as the Bouvin brothers opened their mouths to protest. "Going off half-cocked will gain us nothing and could well play right into Carston's hands. Duncan, I know you'll want to go to the house, but I think you should stay here for now."

MacLeod nodded. "No problem," he said. "The house can wait. Tomorrow's Saturday, it's soon enough." Then he would have the weekend to start cleaning up the place, checking out the electrical system, the state of the plumbing and central-heating.

###

Gervais returned to the yard in the late afternoon, and dusk was closing down. Already stars were diamond-sharp in the darkening sky. It would be another frosty night with the promise of a fine day to come. The mood in the small office, though, was somber.

Gervais sat at his desk and Yves put a mug of steaming coffee in front of him. Gervais nodded his thanks and wrapped his cold hands around the welcome warmth.

"The families have talked it over," he said quietly, voice expressionless, "and the majority vote is to abide by Henri's wishes." The Bouvin brothers came to their feet, sending their chairs clattering back.

"That's--crazy!" Jean-Michel exploded. "They can't do that!"

"You mean he's going to get away with it?" Matthieu yelled at the same time. "No!"

"He hasn't gotten away with anything," Gervais pointed out, voice rigidly controlled. "Whatever illegal deal he had going that involved the Lanterns is dead in the water."
"The hell it is!" Jean-Michel snapped. "All he'll do is move it somewhere else, make some other poor bastard's life hell!"

"I did mention that," Gervais said. He didn't look up, just stared into the depths of his coffee. "Most thought it's not for us to do anything more than we already have."

"I can agree with that." Yves raised his voice over the Bouvins' protests. "We're not cops and we're not vigilantes. Henri's done his best to shoot Carston down, and if he's succeeded then I say it's time to let it go. Though it wouldn't hurt to keep an eye on Theroux and his thugs."

Thierry nodded. "I agree," he said.

"But Henri wouldn't have written that bloody letter, wouldn't have been driven to suicide, if Carston hadn't turned his life into a living nightmare!" Matthieu shouted. "Surely we can't let that go unpunished? Sensei--tell him!"

Gervais glanced up, eyes on MacLeod's face, and caught a fleeting glimpse of something implacable. Then a wry, self-mocking smile twisted MacLeod's mouth. "A while ago," he said, "I'd have been at the forefront, sword swinging, banner flying, full of self-righteous zeal; judge, jury and executioner. Yves is right. We're not cops. We're not vigilantes. We stay alert."

Gervais wasn't surprised. There was a level head on MacLeod's shoulders. For himself, he was pulled both ways. Part of him wanted to strike at Carston, regardless of the consequences, but the sensible part of him knew Yves and MacLeod were right.

"But--" Jean-Michel started, and was interrupted by the phone. Gervais scooped it up, glad of the distraction, and the others lapsed into a sullen silence. "Dubosc Boatyard," he began.

"Gervais Dubosc?" It was a deep voice, drawling, fluent in French, but not French.

"Yes, who--?"

"Jack Carston. I've given some careful consideration to Henri's proposition," he said, "and I've decided I can go along with it. Oh, condolences on your sad loss, by the way."

"It's an ultimatum," Gervais snarled, "not a proposition. You'll abide by it?"

"Are we going to quibble over a word? Whatever--yes, I'll abide by it. Will you?"

"Yes. Until you break it."

Carston laughed. "Be careful, Dubosc, or I might decide it'll be worth it just to crush you and the Bouvin tribe you have working for you. Just to clear up a puzzle, do you know who bought the Lanterns?"

"Yes. I did. Through an agent." And he put the phone down as Carston started to speak. The silence in the office was now expectant, and all eyes were focussed on him. "Carston's agreed," Gervais said, and didn't know whether he was relieved or disappointed. He felt Yves' hand on his shoulder, steadying, comforting.

"How is Simone?" Yves asked, and the question put an effective dampener on the Bouvins' vociferousness.

"Stunned, distraught, but I don't think it's fully hit her yet. She came back with me and Grand-mère is looking after her. I'm going to collect Madeleine and Philippe tomorrow, and I'm hoping Simone
will come with me."

"Whatever we can do--but you know that," Yves said, and there was a general murmur of agreement.

Gervais nodded. "Thanks," he said. "Simone will need all the support we can give her." He glanced at his watch. "Well, we may as well call it a day."

"And I, for one, intend to go out tonight and get very drunk," Jean-Michel announced. "Who's with me?"

###

Henri Pasquier received a wake of Celtic proportions, and the House of the Lanterns had enough toasts drunk to it to libate every door and window in the place. If MacLeod hadn’t been immortal, with all the recuperative powers that came with the package, he would have been severely hung-over the next morning. As it was, when he came down to the kitchen he found only Margot there, removing fresh-baked croissants from the oven.

"Is Gervais stirring?" she demanded. "He'll need to be up and about soon, if he wants to get off to Rouen today."

"He was still snoring when I went past his door." MacLeod smiled. "Simone is awake, though. She's changed her mind, said she would like to go with him, after all."

"Good! She and Madeleine were always close, and she adored Philippe when he was a baby. So, what are your plans for the day? Starting work on that new house?"

"Not a hard guess," he acknowledged.

"Then you'll need plenty of soap and elbow grease. I hope Madame de Carteret never learns what that Carston was using her home for, it would just about finish her off, the poor old soul."

"She won't learn it from me," MacLeod said. "She's a remarkable lady, Grand-mère."

"She's good Normandy stock," Margot said briskly. "Now, breakfast. You'll need more to eat than croissants if you're going to be up at the house all day. You'll need other things as well. I'll sort something out for you."

The bag of tools in the back of the Citroen was comprehensive enough for most of what MacLeod intended to do in the house over the weekend. There was also the basic house cleaning kit and that went into the car as well. Then Margot came out with a cardboard box that held a kettle, some coffee, a good part of last night's ham joint, and a large chunk of cheese, along with bread and butter and necessary utensils.

"Something to keep you going until this evening," she said.

"Thank you." He smiled, then on impulse leaned down and kissed her cheek. She smelt of lavender and croissants fresh from the oven. "For everything."

"Pff," Margot snorted, "what else would I do?" She paused and bit her lip. "Duncan, this Carston
nightmare--is it all over?"

"Possibly. He has the reputation of being a clever business man, so I can't see him risking all his prospects over this." Which made perfect sense, and yet….

"Men have done cruel, stupid things in the past, for the sake of revenge." Margot sighed, and MacLeod winced. "I suppose he'll just--regroup. Is that the word? Go somewhere else and do the same thing?"

"Probably."

"It doesn't seem right," Margot muttered. "All the grief and pain he caused--" She broke off and shook her head. "No. It's done with," she said abruptly, making a cutting sweep with her hand. "Now we look forward. Gervais' and Madeleine's new baby, your new home."

"You have a lot of wisdom, Grand-mère." MacLeod smiled.

"At seventy-six, I should hope so!"

MacLeod laughed. When he'd reached seventy-six years, he hadn't learned a thing. Nor had he three centuries later. It had taken the Napoleonic War to plant the seeds, and Darius to nurture them. Even so, they were a long time growing and still hadn't reached maturity any more than he had. But he was getting there--hopefully.

###

The Citroen pulled up outside the gates, MacLeod climbed out of the car and unfastened the padlock and pocketed it. He pushed the gates wide, then got back in and drove up to the front steps. His front steps.

His smile was rueful as he climbed them. It was far from the first time he'd bought or rented somewhere to live, but the House of the Lanterns was different somehow.

Another padlock fastened the green shutters over the door. It joined the first and MacLeod opened the shutters, hooked them to the wall. Then he gave a low whistle of appreciation. The door was made of unstained oak, aged to a pale silvery grey, and deeply carved in a centuries-old pattern. He reached out, ran his fingers over the sinuous shapes in the wood, following the lines of the central roundel and leaving a clean trail through the grime of years.

The La Tène theme again, this time from something found in the River Thames; the Battersea shield. As a design it was beautiful and completely over the top, but what could be more appropriate as a door? He hoped it had the same carving on the inside, but couldn't remember seeing it in the shadows during his earlier, clandestine visits.

MacLeod fitted the key in the lock and carefully turned it. The wards were in need of oiling, and he wondered for a moment if the key would snap rather than trip the mechanism. But then everything grated into place and he pushed at the door. Hinges complained as the door swung open, and he stepped into the living room. The wind followed him, stirring dust and cobwebs, and the shaft of sunlight probed in to find the pool of light from the dome high above.

The two huge windows each side of the door opened inwards, giving access to the padlocked
shutters. MacLeod opened both, threw them wide, then he went through the house, opened every
door, internal and external, and every window, hooking back the shutters and letting the cold, fresh
wind blow through. Light and sea-scent and sound came with it, cleansing, invigorating, blowing
away more than the stale air.

For a while he wandered through the rooms, reaffirming his ideas and plans, settling the house
about him the way he'd settle a cloak around his shoulders. His home. And it needed a hell of a lot
of work.

By the time dusk was falling, MacLeod had checked through the plumbing for leaks and fixed the
few he'd found. The toilets flushed, and clear, cold water came out of the cold taps and hot water
out of the hot taps. The electrics were reasonably sound, given the age of the plugs and wiring, and
he'd managed to coax the central-heating system into life. It wheezed like an asthmatic, but it
functioned more or less, though it took a while for the air-vents to stop smelling of singed rodent
bedding. Some were blocked and took some clearing.

In the living room, a cross-threaded screw on one vent gave him problems. His efforts to loosen it
had resulted in a skidding screwdriver and a deep gash to his left hand. It had hurt like hell and had
bled copiously, and MacLeod left a bright trail from the living room to the kitchen sink, where he
let the wound drip until it healed over.

That was the only setback.

###

By the time MacLeod decided it was nearly time to call it a day, he was hot and dirty, and wished
he'd brought some spare clothes with him. He could do with a bath. Instead, he took the broom and
swept off the terrace, brushing away years of leaves, dirt, old feathers and bird-droppings.

Sheltered as it was, the terrace retained something of the sun's warmth, giving more than a hint of
the spring to come. In the evening light the sea below was pellucid, still and poised on the furthest
flood of low water. Peace filled him; this place was his now, in ways that went beyond the signing
of deeds and the payment of money. It belonged to him--or he to it, he wasn't sure which and it
didn't matter. It simply was.

On impulse he kicked off his shoes and sank to the newly swept flagstones, shifting easily into full
lotus. He closed his eyes and let the sea-song merge with the rhythm of his breathing, the steady
beat of his heart.

Since he had started to explore and manipulate his quickening, the meditative trance-state came to
him more and more easily. This evening was no exception and he drifted into its embrace, sorting
the events of the last few days in his mind.

Then MacLeod let his thoughts go where they would, and inevitably they turned to distant friends,
to one in particular. Methos. The more he worked with his quickening, the more Bordeaux and that
double strike grew in his mind. So did the images that came to him with Methos' Presence. He
didn’t doubt for a moment that those images were part of that ancient soul, yet his awareness of
them had only happened after the double quickening. Did Methos have the same recognition of his,
MacLeod’s, quickening? Was that another reason why Methos was so rarely around and never
stayed long?
Loneliness was an ever-present ache and MacLeod acknowledged it would be much worse if he hadn't been taken into the Dubosc-Bouvin clans with such unconditional acceptance. But he only had himself to blame if he was forever isolated from those other friends.

But he needed them more, he admitted to himself, than they needed him. Unsettled, the trance thinned, began to shred away from him, smoke on the wind. He caught it back, deepened the meditative state, and because the emptiness inside was more than he could take right now, he began to build a picture of a face, Joe's face. But the hair would not stay grey, the eyes shimmered from whiskey-pale to hazel, and it was Methos' features gazing back at him.

With his feline ability to make himself at home and comfortable no matter the circumstances, Methos was a long-limbed sprawl--somewhere. Not here. Or maybe it was? Background and foreground were hazy, insubstantial, but he recognised familiar flagstones, he'd just swept years of old leaves and bird shit off them. But there were also bright ghosts of planters spilling over with summer flowers, blood-red geraniums and the sword-leaves of bronze phormiums. Methos was bare-foot, wearing a loose shirt, open to the waist, loose pants tied with a drawstring. Both were frost-white, both were silk that drifted and clung and molded itself to the lean form beneath. Silk and knives and walls of adamant and ice.

MacLeod didn't question the trance-created image, just accepted it.

"I want to show you my new home," he said.

"Okay," Methos rolled onto his back, hands clasped beneath his head, in no hurry to move. "It's not another barge, is it? I don't like boats, remember."

"I remember. It's a house, on a cliff above the sea."

"Ah, but are you sure it's a home?"

"Yes."

"Home is where the heart is. I'll have it done in poker-work and you can hang it above your fireplace. You might remember it, then."

"It hasn't got a fireplace."

"What's the use of that?" Methos demanded crossly, slanting a glittering glare at him. "A home has to have a fireplace, and a thick, soft rug in front of it. You better make sure you put one in."

"I suppose I could."

"Suppose nothing. Do it. I need a fireplace, MacLeod."

"Oh. Okay. Then you'll stay?"

"I might." Methos stretched with languorous grace and rolled onto his side, head propped on one hand and a secret smile curving his mouth. Hazel eyes were hooded, his gaze intimate and speculative. "I might," he whispered.

Unexpected desire pooled in MacLeod's loins, disturbing the trance. He knew this vision-Methos was dangerous, lethal in a way that the Methos of the conscious world rarely showed himself to be. Knives, sharp enough to cut out the heart, shred the soul. MacLeod found himself caught by the enigmatic gaze, mesmerized.
"You don't know me," Methos drawled. "Are you sure you want to?"

"I'm sure."

"Maybe I'll hold you to that." The eyes moved slowly over his body, as if they saw through his clothing to the flesh beneath, and it fuelled the heat in his blood.

"Methos," he said aloud and the vision faded away, leaving only a trailing echo of a promise in his head and an arousal in his groin.

"Hold you...."

"Methos?" he whispered, pressing the heels of his hands to his closed eyes. Where the hell had that come from?

Stupid question. Who was he trying to kid, for God's sake? He knew where it had come from. His not-so-subconscious mind wouldn't let go of Methos.

MacLeod wasn't a fool. He knew he was handsome by most people's standards, knew he could usually charm when he wanted to, and was well aware that most women and not a few men found him attractive. He had all the confidence in himself and his sexuality that came with over four hundred years of living a full life. But this was Methos, who had more than forty-five centuries advantage over him.

A twist of fear and yearning tightened around his heart. What was he more afraid of, damage to his pride, or to his heart? And did either of them matter as long as Methos was happy to spend some time with him? He wanted the man in his life on whatever terms Methos set, be it friend, casual fuck, or long-term lover.

Well, the Carston situation looked as if it was over, so he had no more excuses. He should take the chance and go to Paris. Methos would find him there soon enough, if he wanted to.

But was it all over? Why did he have the feeling that this was just an intermission before the next act? Or was he simply trying to find reasons not to leave?

MacLeod shivered, and the intuition sank into his bones. For a while they would be living in the eye of the hurricane, best to enjoy the peace while they had it.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. MacLeod rose to his feet and stepped into his shoes. He should go back to the farmhouse if he was to clean up before the evening meal.

Fireplace. Tomorrow, he'd decide where the fireplace would be going.
Chaos reigned in the Dubosc household. An over-tired six year old imp of Satan was having a screaming tantrum in the kitchen and Gaspard was trying to distract him. Margot and a very pregnant Madeleine were arguing in the hallway. Gervais and Matthieu carried suitcases and child-related paraphernalia past them into the house. Gervais and his wife wouldn’t be going back to their house in Flamanville just yet, and Gervais grew more and more verbally impatient. The younger Bouvin's attention was elsewhere.

The increasingly heated discussion between Margot and Madeleine centered on Simone, MacLeod discovered. The girl was still locked into her shock and Margot was all for jolting her out of it. Madeleine insisted on the tender-loving-care approach. By his expression, Matthieu would readily volunteer for the latter.

MacLeod edged past the arguing women into the relative calm of the sitting-room. Simone sat hunched over on the couch in front of the fire, curled around her grief as if it was a physical injury. Last night she had been coiled tighter than a spring, barely speaking. This evening she looked little different: pale and drawn, dark hair clinging untidily to her pretty face, and her eyes were dry, bruised with sleeplessness. A cup of tea stood on the coffee table beside her, untouched and cooling.

The deep hurt and anger in her pulled MacLeod to her side. He knew it wasn’t his place to intervene, but he could no more have walked away from her need than if she had been lying there, bleeding. "Hi," he said quietly. "Mademoiselle Pasquier? We met last night and this morning. I'm Duncan MacLeod, if you remember. Can I get you another tea? Or a brandy?"

She looked up and tried to smile. "Our new Bouvin," she said. "Of course I remember. Matthieu told me about you in his letters--have I already said that? I'm sorry, I can't seem to get my thoughts together, and I-I would very much like a brandy. But not calvados."

"Not calvados it is."

He poured a measure of cognac and brought it to her. "Has Gervais talked to you?" he asked.

"About why Papa really did it? Yes! M'sieur MacLeod, I want that man dead!"

"I know," MacLeod said, voice gentle, "and I understand. But how will that make us any different from him?"

"You don't understand!" she hissed fiercely, putting down the glass with a violence that slopped the brandy over its edge. "How can you?" It was the universal accusation of Youth and MacLeod abruptly felt all of his years pressing down on him. He took a seat on the couch beside her, knowing he had to reach her but not wanting to drop his own barriers. In the end, though, he had no choice.

"Because I lost someone more dear to me than my own life," he answered. "She was killed by a mugger after her purse. And yes, I wanted him dead. I wanted to rip his guts out with my bare hands and hang him with them. But I didn't."

Startled by his sudden intensity, she stared at him. "Why didn't you?"

"Because there was Richie, who was like a kid brother to us, and he needed me to be there, to be calm and sane and help him grieve."
"Well, I don't have a kid brother! There's just me, now, and I will have him dead!"

"No, you're not alone. There are these people here; the rest of the Pasquiers, the Dubosc, the Bouvins, all the others. Love is a very powerful thing, Mademoiselle. I don't doubt that if you say the word to one of them, he'll go and kill your dragon for you, or die trying. If he succeeds, then the Police Judiciaire will put him on trial and--do I have to go on? Either way, you'll have another wound to carry, another hole in your life."

"That's--a horrible thing to say!"

"It's the truth," he said with implacable tenderness. "Rebuild your life, Mademoiselle, and don't lessen Henri Pasquier's sacrifice with a useless revenge."

Simone's jaw slackened. "But--I--" Then her eyes filled and she choked back a sob.

"Let it go," MacLeod whispered, smoothing curls back from her cheek. "Let it go and start again."

She half-fell into his arms and shrieked her pain, screamed it, pummeling his chest and shoulders with hard fists, her tears coming in a flood that swept away all her control. MacLeod folded her into his embrace and rode out the emotional storm, aware of Margot at his side and her quiet, "Thank God, at last." She knelt on the floor and wrapped her arms about both of them.

###

It took over an hour for Simone to weep herself into a deep sleep, and MacLeod didn't move except to lean his face into her hair and whisper a quiet litany in a language Margot didn't understand. Not English, that was certain. When the girl finally lapsed into hiccups and then silence, MacLeod raised his head and met Margot's gaze, she recognised the rawness of the man's own pain.

"Well done," she said gently, getting to her feet with some difficulty. "Thank you, Duncan. Let Gervais take her now. He'll carry her up to bed and Madeleine and I will see to her. Dinner's going to be late, so you'll have plenty of time to wash and change." And compose himself. Whatever he'd said to Simone to trigger her release had come from the wounded heart of him. Later, Margot vowed, she'd spend some time alone with him; it was clear to her he needed to talk out some of his own heartache, whether he knew it or not.

He nodded, but didn't speak, just carefully loosened his embrace so Gervais could scoop Simone into his arms.

"I was wrong," Madeleine whispered, her own face wet with tears. "Grand-mère was right. She needed to cry. Duncan--can I call you that? Gervais talked about you every time he phoned so I feel I know you and you look so much like Matthieu you have to be a Bouvin and that makes you practically family--Simone is like a sister--"

"Madeleine," Margot said sternly, "come and help. Duncan doesn't need your babbling."

"Grand-mère is such a bully," She tried for a watery smile and just about managed it. "Thank you." And she followed Margot out of the room.

"I better be going as well," Matthieu said. There was a set to his mouth that might have been anger,
Dinner was a subdued meal. Soon after it was over, Gervais and Madeleine went to their bed, and Gaspard departed to make the usual end-of-day rounds of his livestock.

Margot called MacLeod into the kitchen, gestured to a chair and waited until he'd sat at the big table. "Have you sent that letter yet?" she asked quietly, "the one to your friend in Paris?" She knew he hadn't. She'd already checked the pockets of the work jacket hanging behind the door.

MacLeod shook his head. "Not yet," he admitted. "I think maybe it's too late. I've been away for five years, Grand-mère."

"Pff," she said. "That's nothing, if they're true friends."

"They are, but...."

"Why did you leave them? Why isolate yourself from those who care about you?"

"They have enough to cope with, without my problems."

"That's what friends are for. You helped Simone today, a girl you don't know and have only just met. How would you feel if you knew one of your friends had a lot of pain to carry, and deliberately walked away from you rather than accept your help?"

MacLeod flushed, his jaw set to a stubborn jut. "But--"

"'No buts," she interrupted. "The longer you leave it, the harder it will be to send it, and the more hurt and angry they will be."

"I know. But when I left, I needed time to come to terms, to find answers." He laughed bitterly. "There are no answers, Grand-mère."

"You lost someone?"

"Yes." His voice was a husky whisper. "Tessa, Richie, Connor, Darius--they are dead, Grand-mère. Connor was the latest one and I--I--"

"Tell me about them." He stared at her, eyes almost black with pain. "Tessa. She was your wife?"

"In here, she was." MacLeod touched his chest. "We were together for twelve years. She--" He stopped, unable to go on.

Margot was relentless. "How did she die? Was she sick?"

"No. She was shot by a punk kid after her purse. I heard the shot. She was dead by the time I reached her. There was nothing I could do. Nothing. She was my life, Grand-mère."

"But you put your life back together and went on."

"Yes. Eventually."
"Richie. Tell me about him."

"A teen on the wrong track. We kind of fostered him, gave him a home, a family. He was like a kid brother."

"What happened to him?" Margot asked gently. She held one of his hands in both of hers, could feel the tension shuddering through him. "Tell me, my dear."

"I killed him." The words were out before he could stop them.

She tightened her grip. "Tell me."

"It was--an accident. My fault."

She didn't ask about the other names. "So much death in your life, my dear," Margot whispered. "Surely this must make your friends so much more precious to you?"

"Yes. Too much to risk being around me. At least, that's what I thought. I attract trouble, Grand-mère."

"That I don't doubt," she said with a snort of wry amusement. "But, Duncan, you don't have the right to make that decision for them. It is for them to make. Their lives, their choice. Never yours."

"I know. I've been trying to learn it, but it's not an easy lesson and by now it's probably too late. All the time I was growing up, I was trained to lead, to protect my own. It's something I don't have to think about, Grand-mère, it's in me, as instinctive as breathing. And sometimes it seems like the best way I can protect them is to stay away."

"And now?"

"I don't know." He sighed, sorrow carved into the lines of his face, ageing him. The expression in his eyes might have been born of centuries of grief and loss.

"What are their names, these friends you're so afraid of losing?"

"Joe," he said quietly. "Amanda. Adam. I owe them so much, Grand-mère. They helped me survive, but--"

"No buts." She leaned forward and pushed back the lock of dark hair that had come free, and planted a kiss on his forehead. "Enough for now. Go to bed, my dear. Tomorrow is another day."

He gave her a slight smile that almost broke her heart and stood up. "Goodnight, Grand-mère."

When the door closed behind him, Margot went to the coat rack behind the door and took the envelope from the pocket of his work jacket. It was smudged and crumpled from the weeks it had been in there, but the address was clear enough. Should she post it in the morning, or leave it for him to make the decision? It would be better if he did it himself, of course, but could he be trusted to do it? Well, she'd give him the benefit of the doubt for now. But if it was still in his pocket come the New Year, then one way or another she'd make sure it was sent. She tucked it back into its pocket and went up the stairs.

Later, lying in bed next to the gently snoring Gaspard, Margot found herself thinking of Duncan MacLeod and all he'd told her. Then she started to add up the years, and frowned in the darkness. Something wasn't right. To have fitted all that grief into his life, the man would have to be a good ten years older than he appeared, yet she knew deep in her soul he wasn't lying to her. Well,
maybe he and his Tessa had been childhood sweethearts.

Turning over and settling into her pillow, Margot put it out of her mind. Like Simone, the man was wounded and needed the solace only a family could give. That was all that was important for now.

###

There was a small bank in a secluded side street in Geneva. Methos had used it off and on since the 1700s. Some of his more valuable items were stored in those vaults, all of them ancient chronicles. Some were his own, ones written about him or by him that he didn’t want to fall into anyone’s hands, but couldn’t bring himself to destroy. There were plenty of others, of course, scattered in equally safe places around the planet.

A man tends to accumulate a lot of things over five thousand years, and being a chronic hoarder of the written word didn’t help. Methos knew he could discard anyone and anything and walk away without a backward glance. Except books, scrolls, tablets, and Duncan MacLeod. And Joe Dawson. Possibly Amanda.

The bundle of papers and the two chronicles just fitted into his briefcase. He snapped it closed and set the combination lock. There were more volumes in other secure locations that covered the same period of time and the same subject. But as far as he could recall, although they dealt with Darius’ research into quickenings, they didn’t mention Ignifers.

Back at the small apartment that overlooked the lake, Methos spread the documents and books over the table in chronological order. Then he fetched bottled water and already prepared sandwiches from the refrigerator and started reading.

Padua, 1476

"Ignifers?" Methos said blankly. The refectory was deserted by all but the two of them, and Darius had brought him chilled white wine, bread and stew himself rather than risk their conversation being overheard by any of the monks. "I thought you were researching quickenings."

"I am, and they are part of it. Men and women who have--something." The priest's conviction glowed in his eyes, throbbed in his voice and Methos found himself hanging onto every word. Darius had led armies, had led them into hopeless battles and through the conflict to victory because he could win their hearts. Men had followed him out of love and trust and respect, not fear. That old magic had never left him. "It's an amazing gift, Methos! More than charisma or charm, they draw people to them for good or for ill. Rare, yes, but if they survive, they can bring great benefit to mankind!" Then Darius' expression darkened. "And great harm," he added sadly. "Two sides of the same coin, my old friend."

"Two sides? What coin?" Methos shook himself free of the insidious spell. Beyond the closed doors the liturgy for Sext began, the soaring chant carried by deep voices, counter-pointed by the soprano of the novices. Incense hung in the air, clung to Darius’ robes and drifted with his every movement. It suddenly seemed unreal, and Methos took a healthy swallow of wine to ground himself. "I know a few of us have talents most don’t, but this is the first I've heard of Ignifers."

"It's a name I’ve given them. They have a kind of fire…it's difficult to explain. Some give, some take."
"If they survive, you said." Methos frowned. "Are they less likely to survive than the rest of us, then?"

"The Givers are--vulnerable." And Darius sighed. "Especially the young ones. Too much grief, too much pain..." He shook his head. "It's hard enough for us to cope with our own losses. When you give comfort and caring to others in need, it becomes doubly hard. And we cannot walk away from that need."

Methos' eyebrow twitched up at that 'we', but he didn't interrupt.

"If someone is hurting, lost and alone," Darius was saying, "we feel their hurt and loneliness and we have to reach out, help them find themselves. If they need solace, we have to give what ease we can. It is difficult. Some of us have found ways to cope, and with age comes resilience. But it is very hard, Methos. The toll on the young ones is high and the few that I have found--" Darius crossed himself. "They died. Carrying so much grief and pain, their own and others, they lose hope. Without hope, without the will to go on, they simply wait for someone to take their heads."

"That's very sad," Methos said politely, and Darius pinned him with a stare that reminded Methos again that this priest had been and still was a formidable warrior. "What else can I say?" he protested. "If they haven't got the strength to survive, then they die. It's the way things are for us."

"All they have to do is live long enough to grow stronger!" Darius snapped.

"That's all very fine, but--" He stopped, and the cynical 'what use is this so-amazing gift?' remained unspoken. He needn't have bothered, Darius knew him too well.

"We help the injured, comfort the dying, give strength to the weak, a safe harbor to the weary, and stand shoulder to shoulder with the strong," Darius said softly. "We redress the Balance, Methos, complete the Pattern."

"I knew that would come into it sooner or later," Methos said with a sigh. "All right, given that you're on the right path, how do your Pattern and Fire Bearers fit in with the Game? If there truly can be only one of us left at the end, then why do they exist at all? It's not a matter of Good and Evil, Light and Dark, we are all of us shades of grey. You know that and I know that. So," he said, with cold deliberation, "what is the function of this talent within the structure of the Game?"

"It has no place in the Game." Darius smiled. "And that's its function. It exists outside of this senseless murder and I believe it could nullify it. If enough of us survive. An end to the Game, Methos. An end to the slaughter of lives, of centuries of knowledge and experience! What use is all of that locked into one soul? All that we have seen and learned could be written down in great libraries for the benefit of all mankind--"

"Libraries," Methos snorted. "Like the one at Alexandria? We know what happened to that, don't we?"

"Kronos. Yes, which brings me to the Takers. By their very nature they are more easily found, and I thank God they are as rare. Hatred, anger, fear, lust: powerful feelings they take into themselves and feed upon like quickening fire. And they give it all back, forming a circle of emotions and violence that nourishes them."

Methos was silent. He'd known what Kronos was, though he'd had no name for it at the time. Fire Bearer. Yes, that would define him. One who could set fire to the world, literally or figuratively--in Kronos' case, literally, if he had the chance.
"There are those of us who know of the Takers," Darius said after a pause. "I've bastardized the Latin and labeled them Vorarigni. The Givers I've called Datorigni, and I want to hide them. Too many would seek to kill them rather than risk an end to the Game. Nor are all of them immortals, and they are even more vulnerable. Methos, Datorigni must survive! All of them, as many as can be found and protected! To do that, I need your help."

"How?" he said. "What can I do? I'm not either one."

"I know, but you are ancient, you have immense curiosity, and you travel. If you meet any who might be Datorigni, whether they're immortal or mortal, send them to me."

Methos gazed at this man who was the opposite of all that Kronos was and smiled. "Of course I will," he said, already making plans to leave Padua in the morning instead of staying for as long as he'd originally planned, and to have nothing at all to do with Ignifers of any persuasion. Even so, he would have to listen to Darius talk of them for most of the evening and night.

Methos sighed and rested his head in his hands. When it came down to it, Darius had been a friend. More than that, Methos had sometimes needed the safe harbor of the priest's company. But he'd made sure it was many years before they met again, and they hadn't spoken of Ignifers then or since. Darius was dead, killed by a paranoid mortal, and Methos had no idea what more the priest had discovered, nor where, if at all, he'd hidden his precious Datorigni.

Cassandra knew something of Vorarigni, that much was clear, but not enough on Ignifers to recognise a difference between the two types. Which begged the question, was Duncan MacLeod a Datorigni or not? Methos thought through all he knew of the man, and acknowledged he certainly fit some of the criteria laid out on the pages before him.

"Damn you, Darius," he said aloud. "I don't want to be involved. Your Scottish brat attracts trouble like a bloody magnet." The latter was undeniably true, and as for the former, that warm lodestone in his soul ensured he was already involved and couldn't be anything else. Didn't want it any other way, if he was honest with himself.

"The Givers are--vulnerable," Darius' voice sighed in his memory. "Especially the young ones." How young was young? Beside his own years, every living immortal was a child. MacLeod was barely weaned at 400 plus, and Darius' words put a new slant on his five-year disappearing act.

It was time, Methos decided, to touch base with Joe Dawson again, and then decide whether or not he was going to start hunting Highlanders.
Chapter 11

Paris in winter was never a pleasant prospect. Methos had spent most of the last five years in Australia and New Zealand, and before that he'd swanned between Singapore, Bangkok and Hong Kong as the fancy took him. His trips to Europe had been infrequent. Now the reality of January's sleet-laden rain slapped him in the face, slid remorselessly down his neck, soaked up through his shoes and socks.

"I must be insane!" he said aloud. "If I wanted cold I could go back to the fucking Alps!" At least Geneva's weather had been clean, honest snow. He could see Dawson some other time, or better yet, pick up a phone. All he had to do was turn around, go back into the airport and find a flight out to Switzerland. But Methos didn't like cold, anymore than he liked wet. Unless the wet was a warm tropical sea lapping white coral sands shaded by-- A car went past, sending up a swathe of dirty water that drenched him from hip to foot. "I am insane. Totally. Barking. Mad." He glared around, located the taxi rank and headed for the first car there, beating an American family to it by the simple expedient of using shoulders and fluent French.

Methos gave the driver the address of a small hotel in the centre of Paris and slouched back into the seat. He knew why he was here: because a quiet voice in the back of his head had been nagging at him for months now, and his research in Geneva had put a new imperative to the nag. He'd been away too long. The last time Methos checked the Watchers' database, MacLeod was still conspicuous by his absence, unless he had showed up overnight, but it would be good to see Joe Dawson again.

Not that he needed to stay around for any length of time. Just enough to look in on the Watcher, have a few beers and/or whiskies, find out if the man was any happier being a researcher, and more importantly, catch up on the Watcher-gossip. If anyone had picked up on the odd whispers that hadn't made it to the Sightings Bulletins, it would be Dawson.

He shifted uncomfortably, feeling the clamminess of wet clothes sticking to his skin. Yes, he'd socialize for a couple of days then fly out to--he'd decide where when he'd had a chance to put together any scraps of information he'd managed to glean. But first and foremost, as soon as he was in his hotel room, a hot shower and a decent meal would be the first items on his agenda, then a visit to Le Blues bar.

Where the hell was Duncan MacLeod? The bloody man must have absorbed Connor's skill at disappearing without a trace along with his quickening.

Not that he was concerned, of course. MacLeod was well able to take care of his own skin, which was fortunate considering the way he attracted trouble. Iron-filings and magnets had nothing on the Scottish idiot--and you couldn't blame it on his immortality. Methos had read the man's chronicles--those unofficial ones that Joe had hidden away in what he'd erroneously considered a safe place. Some of them had been written up from what the Watcher had learned over the years in conversations with MacLeod. If only half of it was true, MacLeod had thrown himself into some very sticky situations during his thirty years of mortal life. The fact that he'd even managed to live to thirty before someone offed him was, in Methos' opinion, a small miracle.

Another miracle was the MacLeod head remaining on the MacLeod shoulders for as long as it had. Sooner or later the man's luck would run out, and that would be that. A wry smile twisted Methos' mouth. He knew there was a running bet at the Watchers' HQ as to which immortal would be the last one standing, and MacLeod's name was up there among the front-runners. The fools who put their money on MacLeod clearly didn’t know the man. Duncan MacLeod was a very efficient killer.
when he had to be, but he wasn't a predator. Therefore, he couldn't win.

The trouble was, Dawson couldn't see it that way.

Methos used his sleeve to wipe condensation off the window and peered out at the familiar rain-washed boulevards. Paris no longer had any appeal for him, he discovered, and he made a decision. This would be his last visit, and the nag at the back of his mind could go hang. Filling some of Darius' criteria didn't make Duncan MacLeod a Datorigni, and the man was more than capable of surviving without a keeper. After all, he'd done a pretty good job of it for the centuries pre-Methos. Personally, Methos didn’t intend to be anywhere that had a temperature below 25°C for the rest of his life.

A hot shower followed by a good meal with excellent wine put Methos in a more amenable frame of mind. Food and alcohol were two things Paris was very good at. Maybe he'd stretch a point and visit occasionally in the summer.

###

Le Blues bar was crowded and noisy. A trio was setting up their instruments on the small dais, and Joe was nowhere in sight. He bellowed a question to the bartender, who screamed back and waved toward the door at the back. Methos nodded and ambled through. This was familiar territory; Joe's office was ahead of him, to one side were the stairs that led up to his apartment above the bar, to the other were the steps down to the cellar. He opened the office door and breezed in.

"I've come to buy you a drink," he said.

"That'll change the weather," Joe observed, looking up from his computer screen and grinning. "Long time, no see. You're looking good."

"So are you," Methos lied with a smile. The Watcher was thinner, hair and beard almost all white now, the whiskey-gold of his eyes a startling contrast under pale brows. He looked older than his sixty-plus years, and the reminder of mortal frailty jolted Methos. MacLeod had better turn up soon, or Joe Dawson might not be around to demand to know where the hell he'd been.

"Yeah, right," Dawson snorted. "I may not shave, but I sure as shit use a mirror once in a while. The bottle and glasses are in the cupboard over there. I won't be a moment, just catching up on stuff."

"Anyone new in town?" Methos asked, setting out the glasses and pouring generous measures of whiskey.

"Nope. Apart from you, Paris is an immortal-free zone."

"No kidding? That's got to be a first."

"Not quite, but it's about as rare as you buying me a drink," Dawson countered. "How about you? Anything to report over the last couple of years?"

"As in a head-count? Zero. I have an infallible technique, remember? At the first hint of Presence, run."
"Yeah, so damn fast no Watcher can keep up with you," Dawson grumbled. "Damn it, Methos, how are we supposed to keep track of you?"

"That's the whole idea, you don't. Look upon it as a training exercise. They'll be so good by the time they've given up trying to creep up on me, they'll be able to shadow any other immortal on the planet."

"I'll pass that along," Dawson said dryly. "I'm sure it'll soothe their dented egos and bruised self-esteem."

Methos snickered and moved to stand behind him, reading over his shoulder as he called up the Recent Sightings screen.

Dawson didn't bother to scroll down the page, just typed 'Duncan MacLeod' in the search field and hit the enter key. Methos sighed and shook his head.

"Do you still do this every evening?"

"Yup."

"Joe," he began, exasperated, then stopped.

"Yes!" Joe hissed, and pulled up the report. Methos leaped forward to read the first few lines, then stood back. There was a strange feeling in his stomach. Five years, and by sheer chance Hans Kruller picked him out of the crowd at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci airport…. "Hans found him this morning," Dawson went on, elation in his voice. "Damn it, I should have checked this sooner! He's staying at the Sheraton Roma--Hans wants backup--can't say I blame him, Mac's too damn good at throwing us off the scent. Shitshitshit! I'm stuck in Research--maybe it's time I took a vacation, soaked up some Italian rain instead of the French variety--"

"By the time you get there, he could have moved on," Methos said, surprised that he sounded normal. Something was choking him and he didn't know if it was relief or anger. "Better to wait for MacLeod to contact you."

"Maybe. Wonder if he's heading back this way."

"Who knows?" Methos shrugged. "Could be he's just drifting." He looked down at Dawson's profile and wondered if Duncan MacLeod knew how much this man missed him. "Joe, don't build your hopes up," he said awkwardly. "It could be Budapest again--there one minute, gone the next, if he was ever there in the first place."

"Yeah, I know. But he's alive, Methos! He's fucking alive!"

"Then let's go out and celebrate." He raised his glass. "A toast; to wandering Highlanders everywhere." You bastard. "Drink up and I'll call a taxi. I'm buying the meal." And tomorrow he was out of here. MacLeod was no Datorigni. If he was, he'd never have walked away from Joe Dawson's friendship: regardless of his own sorrow, he'd've picked up on how much he meant to the poor mortal bastard and stayed around. Watching Dawson was too sodding painful and Methos didn’t like pain, any more than he did cold.

###
Methos didn’t sleep well that night. There was no reason he could pin down; his mind just refused to shut off. Random thoughts circled like drunken rats in a wheel, none of them of any weight or meaning. Jet lag. Bloody planes. On one hand they gave you the freedom of the planet, on the other they knocked your body clock out of sync and made sure you couldn't enjoy said freedom until you caught up with yourself. Or something like that.

He thought wistfully of his days as Adam Pierson, Watcher and Methos Researcher, before that bloody Scot had blundered into his life. Books. Archives. He'd enjoyed that. Ten years of comfortable anonymity--two hundred without taking a quickening--all of it turned on end because of one man's leap of intuition. Why the hell did MacLeod have to make that lateral jump? Answer: because MacLeod functioned on impulses and lateral jumps.

Just like he did. For him those instincts were geared to survival, had kept him alive for over five thousand years. When your gut-instinct told you to run, you ran. Fast and in the opposite direction. You didn’t go looking to see what it was you were supposed to be running from.

Curiosity killed the cat.

So for MacLeod, it was more likely to end in very sharp metal objects heading for his oh-so-vulnerable neck. Angrily Methos punched his pillow into submission and threw himself back on it, scowling at the invisible ceiling. Then, gritting his teeth, he resolutely closed his eyes and conjured up the images of white coral sands, warm sun, and the gentle susurration of waves. Relaxing into the picture, he created a beautiful girl kneeling at his side and smoothing sun-lotion over his--phone.

A phone was ringing.

His phone was ringing, on the bedside table.

Swearing, he groped for it--Joe Dawson--

"For gods' sake," he snarled, "this better be good! Do you know what time it is?"

"Mac's taken a head."

"So? What do you want me to do? Give him a medal? This is not worth waking me up at--" he squinted at his watch, "ten past bloody-six in the morning!"

"Check out the report. I know you can access it. Call me back."

Methos stared at the cell phone in his hand, then carefully replaced it on the cabinet. Joe's voice had been edged with pain, tightly controlled, and he wasn't the kind of man who made a drama out of a molehill. So Methos rolled out of bed and pounced on his laptop, powered it up, thanking the gods for the hoteliers who provided Internet access in their rooms.

Kruller's report was concise and to the point. Duncan MacLeod had spent the day drifting through the restaurants. In the evening he'd added bars and nightclubs to his list, never staying long, taking barely a few sips of his drinks. There were even a few rain-blurred pictures of the man; Rome was suffering the same kind of weather as Paris, by the look of it, but the wide shoulders in the long dark coat were familiar. So was the ponytail with the silver clasp. Methos could see him in his mind's eye--moving through the busy throngs like a black-coated shark through shoals of bright fish.

Hunting. Methos knew the pattern, had seen it done--had done it himself countless times. The steady, relentless circling, homing in on the chosen prey, cutting him out of the herd, cutting him
Methos shivered, reached for his pants and pulled them on, dragged a sweater over his head and carried on reading.

At just gone midnight, MacLeod had singled out Dion Adler of Brooklyn, an immortal barely a hundred years old. They'd fought in an empty piazza in a rundown area not far from the Coliseum, and according to Kruller, it had been a walkover for MacLeod. The relatively young and inexperienced man hadn't lasted five minutes.

Adler's Watcher had also sent in his report, confirming the death and the ID of the victor.

Methos phoned Dawson. "You owe me breakfast," he said before the man could speak. "I'm on my way." He stripped out of his clothes, showered, shaved and dressed again in record time, resenting the necessity to be up and about at that ungodly hour. Someone's hide--or neck--would suffer for this, he told himself, and it wouldn't be Dawson's.

He found the side-door of the bar unlocked and Methos let himself in. He went up the stairs three at a time and slowed to a leisurely stroll as he entered the living room.

Dawson was at his desk, a twin of the one in the office downstairs, and he didn’t look up as the immortal entered. "Mac left Rome on the 0500 shuttle to Madrid," he said. "Coffee and croissants are in the kitchen." He waited until Methos came back to sprawl on the couch, a loaded plate balanced on his flat belly and a steaming mug on the floor within easy reach. Then: "Jacob Kell," he said grimly. "What are the odds of another Dark Quickening?"

Methos shrugged. "I'm no expert," he began.

"You're the nearest I've got," Dawson cut back. "That was Mac in Rome. Hunting. Kell was a headhunter. Mac hasn't headhunted for God knows how long. Not of his own volition," he amended quickly as Methos opened his mouth. "What he did while he was--" and he hesitated, unable to find the words he wanted.

"Possessed by the Dark Side of the Force?" Methos supplied helpfully. "Off his rocker? His own Evil Twin?" The look he received made him regret the flippancy, but he didn’t show it.

The Watcher had a valid point, he acknowledged. In fact, Methos could make a case for MacLeod never hunting for just the quickening. For revenge, payback, self-appointed judge, jury and executioner, yes: for the challenge and the combat--oh, yes. He'd seen the smile of pure, dazzling joy that came over the man's face when he was fighting an opponent of equal skill, had watched that exaltation lift MacLeod's talent to another level. It was eerily, terrifyingly beautiful to watch, and a sane man would pray never to be on the receiving end of that ineffable gift. Unless you were very, very old, in which case you'd have the sense to shoot him in the guts before he got close enough to use that bloody great carving knife.

"Well?" Dawson snapped.

"It's possible," Methos said carefully. "But unlikely." He paused, but Dawson said nothing. "There could be another aspect to this. MacLeod might have had a grudge against Adler, and you know how good he is at holding grudges. If the guy had hurt someone he cares about...."

Dawson grabbed the theory with a desperation that Methos found pathetic. "Yeah," he said. "I'll check that out--backtrack--"

"You do that," Methos said quietly and got to his feet. He finished off the last croissant, drained his
coffee and silently left.

He spent the rest of the day wandering Paris, revisiting old haunts, finally ending up at an empty quay below Notre Dame where once a barge had been moored. What was its name? The Nobile? An-something? It was late afternoon, the skies were threatening rain again, and a bitter wind curled around his ears. He perched on a bollard and gazed at the chill murk of the Seine as it slid past. A bit like his life, he decided: long and convoluted, deep and turgid. With nasty undercurrents to snag the unwary, and livened up by the odd scrap of interesting flotsam.

Maybe Adler had been a one-off, and MacLeod had a damn good reason to hunt the creep down and top him. If that was the case, then maybe he'd stick around for a while. Dawson wasn't handling this so well, and he owed the man, if only for the continuing mask of Adam Pierson. Methos still remained a myth for the majority of immortals and Watchers, for which Joe Dawson was to be thanked.

But if it wasn't an isolated event, then he was out of here. There was an outside chance that sooner or later, if MacLeod had decided to take up his Judge Dredd mantle again, then he might come hunting for that not so mythical head. They'd never really talked about the Horsemen and Methos' role in that centuries-long reign of terror. Methos had, with hide-flaying invective, refused to discuss it any further than they already had. MacLeod had eventually taken the unsubtle hint and let it lie. But it was there, a cancer in the heart of their repaired friendship.

At the first opportunity he was going to up the caliber of the handgun he usually carried, and make sure it was on him at all times.

All that sanctimonious, self-righteous pontificating about the meaninglessness of the Game as opposed to the sanctity of life, and MacLeod was back in Vigilantes-R-Us? Possibly. Or maybe he, Methos, was being overly suspicious, not to say paranoid. Either way, it didn't sit comfortably on his stomach.

Slowly, reluctantly, Methos walked back to the bar.

"Adler was no angel," Dawson said as the immortal came into the apartment. "He started out as a drug-dealer in Miami. After his first death, he was a major player in the Brooklyn underworld, changing his persona a couple of times, but not his trade. So far I haven't found anything to link him with Mac, but he's the kind of lowlife that'd be likely to piss Mac off if their paths crossed."

"Their paths certainly crossed in Rome," Methos said. "MacLeod made sure of it. As nice a display of the Hunt as I've seen in a while. Where is he now, by the way? Has Good Old Hans misplaced him yet?"

"He's in Madrid, hasn't left his hotel room."

"Really?" Methos drawled. "Or is Kruller assuming that he's still in his room?"

"Don't be snide. Hans is an old hand--"

"So is MacLeod and he's going to be watching for a Watcher, which is something Kruller isn't likely to have come across before. I'm hungry. Want to eat out or shall I fix something?"

But Dawson wasn't listening. "First Rome, now Madrid. Maybe Mac is coming home," he said hopefully.

"Yeah," Methos sighed. "Maybe. Come on, haul your bum out of that chair. We're eating out."
"Okay," Dawson said absently, all his attention given to the computer screen. "In a minute."

The minute became half an hour, and in the end, Methos dug a couple of ready-meals out of the freezer and nuked them in the microwave.

###

Kruller's next report wasn't entirely unexpected; MacLeod left his hotel at about nine that evening, went straight to a nightclub and disappeared.

A couple of hours later, the frustrated Watcher was still scurrying though Madrid's nightlife trying to pick him up again.

"That's it." Methos yawned. "MacLeod's dumped him and he's probably laughing all the way to wherever he's going. I, for one, am going to bed." He cocked his head on one side and looked Dawson up and down. Crouched over the computer, the man had the drawn haggardness of someone who'd spent far too many hours on caffeine. "You should do the same. Call it a night and get some sleep, for gods' sake."

"Okay," Dawson muttered again. "In a minute…."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged, and summoned a taxi-ride back to his hotel.

###

Methos slept late. A long-haul flight, followed by days and nights of little rest and virtually no sleep, had taken their inevitable toll and he'd slept like the dead. It was gone midday before he finally crawled out of bed, and the first thing he did was check the Watchers' database. The report took away any thought of a meal.

Mendez had first died during the Spanish Inquisition, and had spent most of his subsequent life as hired muscle. Not exactly a pillar of society, but no master-crook, either. And with no obvious links with MacLeod, until the voice had come out of the night: "I'm Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod, and I've come for your head."

Kruller had finally found his man. Just in time to witness the challenge and duel, and to compare notes with Mendez' Watcher. Before the corpse was even cold, MacLeod was on a flight to Vienna. It had been posted at 11.47 last night. By now, MacLeod would be checking out Vienna. Hunting.

Methos packed his case, patted the reassuring weight of the sword inside his coat, and tucked his new revolver into his pocket. Then realized that Dawson hadn't phoned him. Maybe he hadn't seen it yet. Or maybe he hadn't noticed the beginning of a pattern here.

*Move!* said his instincts, and Methos agreed with them. Right now the safest place to be was the other side of the world.

Jamaica was nice. Or Barbados. Or the Cayman Islands. Yes, he hadn't been to George Town for a
long time. It had a good pace of life: slow and easy and laid back, just as he liked it. But he owed Joe Dawson, so he should at least say goodbye. After lunch.

The hotel restaurant provided Methos with a meal he did not want but forced himself to eat. He drank a lot of very strong coffee, then once more he went back to Le Blues bar.

Methos had no warning, no premonition. All he intended to do was say a casual 'see you somewhen,' and leave. But one look at Joe's starkly white face, and his intuition made that lateral jump. Only one thing could bring that expression of devastating loss and anguish to Joe Dawson's features.

Duncan MacLeod was dead. It was as if something cold had been reborn in him, twisting remorselessly toward heart and lungs, spreading ice as it went. Which was utterly stupid, because he'd been telling Joe for years that it was only a matter of time. Duncan MacLeod was finally, irrevocably, dead, and he couldn't even manage 'I told you so'. It was a moment before he could force his lungs to breathe again.

"In Vienna?" he demanded. "Who?"

"Yes," Joe said, voice harsh with grief. "Kuon Lo--"

Methos turned on his heel and walked out of the bar. Part of him knew he shouldn't leave just yet; there was a grayness to Joe's face that didn't belong there, a tinge to the bearded mouth--

Vienna. Kuon Lo.

No. It was not possible. He'd know, wouldn't he? He tried to reach inside, to find that small piece of resonance he'd inherited at Bordeaux, but couldn't. Too tense, no stillness. It was there, though, had to be. When O'Rourke had killed MacLeod, it hadn't cut out when his sense of the man's Presence had disappeared.

He was shivering now, pain gnawing at him. "Damn you, MacLeod!" he whispered, and heard his voice break on the name. He had finally identified the pain. It had a name as well. Betrayal.

Methos called in favours and within the hour was about to board a private jet to Vienna. Then and only then did he trust himself to phone Dawson. But reached the voice-mail instead. "I'm following up that report," he said, his own voice sounding cold and remote in his ears. "I'll bring him back to Paris. I'll be in touch." He was going to say that it might take a while, but Dawson would know that when he had time to take in the details of the report.

In defeat, the body and its separated head had fallen into the river and the head hadn't been recovered yet. A comparatively small thing to lose in deep water, small and heavy. By the time it turned up--if it turned up--there would be a lot of soft-tissue damage.

Methos decided he didn’t want to eat fish for a while.

###

Once in Vienna, Methos booked into the first hotel he came to and went online. He slid seamlessly into the Watchers' database and checked out Kuon Lo again. He was still in the city. Once more, Methos pulled up the death reports. One new item had been added. The dragon katana had also
gone into the river, and like the head, was still missing. The video of the fight hadn't been uploaded yet, and Methos was obscurely glad of it. He wasn’t sure he wanted to watch MacLeod die.

All that life and energy, ended.

The ice tightened its hold.
Kuon Lo and his attendant shadow were easy to find, thanks to the Watchers database. Methos delayed long enough to make sure he had no Watcher of his own, then stalked his prey.

Even if the Korean wasn’t an acknowledged martial arts expert, Methos wasn’t inclined to play by the rules. What he intended had nothing to do with the Game, and everything to do with retribution. He phoned the man’s hotel, and was put through to his room.

"I've come for your head," he said in Korean. "I'll meet you up on the heli-pad on the roof. Five minutes." He didn’t wait for a reply, just cut the connection, hung around until he saw the immortal leave his room, then went looking for his Watcher.

He found the woman and took her out, carried her to Kuon Lo's room and left her there, unconscious on the bed. Then he made his leisurely way up to the heli-pad, hands deep in his pockets. He was serene in his winter-world, in no hurry.

The Korean was waiting for him in the middle of the yellow H, a curved, shimmering blade held poised in fighting stance. He was young, slim, and moved like oiled silk.

"I am Kuon Lo of Seoul," he said. "Who are you?"

"Death," Methos said, took out the snub-nosed S&W .45 and shot him in the belly. Kuon Lo seemed to fold in on himself, and he went down in a bloody sprawl. Methos strolled over to him, kicked the sword away from the slack fingers, and bent down to take a handful of blood-soaked shirt. He pulled the man to his knees, ignoring the gasping scream of agony, and drew his own blade.

"Why--?" Kuon Lo croaked.

"Because Duncan MacLeod's quickening belongs to me," he said, felt the words sink into his soul and knew he spoke an absolute truth. "To me."

His sword sang through the night and barely checked with the impact. Kuon Lo's head tumbled across the heli-pad, his body hung on its knees for a moment, then slowly slumped to the tarmac. Methos took no notice, just waited with hunger growing in him, waited for that eldritch fire of torment and pleasure to explode through his body; waited for Duncan MacLeod to ride Kuon Lo's storm to him, join with him….

###

In the morning, when he no longer wanted to dismember Duncan MacLeod limb from bloody limb, Methos phoned Paris. He got the voice-mail again. "Joe, you there? Pick up, will you. Okay, don't. I've got some good news. See you soon."

###
As usual, Melissa had watched Robert's contest with Kuon Lo from a distance, enthralled by the deadly grace of the immortals. This time, she had taken a chance and had paired Robert with an opponent who matched him well, and his smile of sheer enjoyment was growing. Kuon Lo's expression never changed--the serene grimness of an expert going about his work. Then Robert's smile had gradually faded, and Melissa had suddenly realized he was doubting--he could lose--Even as she formed the thought, it was over.

She had no memory of how she'd gotten back to her hotel room, nor how long she'd sat on the floor, clutching a cushion to her chest, rocking, rocking. All she could see before her eyes, over and over again, was Robert, lurching sideways, suddenly graceless, the katana falling from his hand. Then the glittering sweep of the Korean's blade, and Robert's head, his beautiful head, toppled from his shoulders.

"No," she whispered, crushing the cushion closer. Numb with shock and despair, mind in a spiral of confusion, all perception of time and purpose lost, she rocked and denied, eyes dry and staring wide at nothing. "No. No."

It took a while, but slowly things began to come back into focus. Robert was dead, and with him her hopes for flushing out Duncan MacLeod. All her months of planning destroyed in the blue-white haze of quickening fire, all her sacrifices gone for nothing and her need to inflict punishment unfulfilled.


Robert was dead. But there was one thing she could still do for him, and that was free his quickening. Kuon Lo would not keep that innocent life essence.

Resolutely, Melissa pulled back the scattered remnants of her life and got to her feet. She fluffed the cushion into shape and placed it just so in its armchair. Then she took the Browning Hi-Power from her purse, checked the clip and put it back. She should have used it before--shot Kuon Lo as soon as she'd seen Robert wavering--she cut off the memory and walked out of the door.

Kuon Lo's hotel was just across the street, and Melissa went straight up to his room. A tall man in a long dark coat was disappearing down the corridor, and she paused with her hand on the door. There was something vaguely familiar about the set of his shoulders, but it wasn't until he was out of sight that her memory supplied the name. Adam Pierson.

"Oh, Robert...." In life he'd failed to draw out Duncan; in death he'd brought the so very elusive Adam to Vienna. Melissa did not doubt that the immortal was here to avenge his friend. The question was: should she let him?

Melissa's quick mind began to function again. She could salvage her original plan from the wreckage, but Kuon Lo was almost certainly too good for this young immortal. Adam was, after all, not so many years older than Robert in immortal terms, and she didn't want Adam to die here, in Vienna. She could give him the help she had failed to give poor Robert; shoot Kuon Lo before he had a chance to take victory and head, and let Adam take his head and claim the quickening. Melissa shivered again.

Robert's quickening. How much of him, if anything, was left in Kuon Lo's consciousness? Why hadn't the Watchers conducted in-depth research into that amazing phenomenon? Idiots. So many wasted opportunities.... And now they had effectively sidelined the one man in a position to add to their knowledge. If the Watchers weren't prepared to sanction medical and scientific research, then
the very least the blind fools should have been doing was encouraging Joseph, supporting him and his friendship with immortals. But it was too late, now.

With a hiss of impatience, Melissa reordered her thoughts. This was neither the time nor the place for her to be rambling. She needed all her wits about her if she was to keep track of Adam without him knowing she was there, and avoid Kuon Lo's Watcher.

Keeping well back, Melissa followed him down the corridor, past the elevator to the stairs door. He went through and up, the steady tap of his shoes on the uncarpeted treads leading her to the roof.

Fortunately he didn’t seem to be in a hurry, but even so, Melissa was panting and leg-weary by the time she reached the top. She looked out over the heli-pad area, struggling to control her breathing.

Adam was a stark silhouette, his back to her. Kuon Lo said something, his sword held ready.

"Death," said Adam. His voice had an icy finality to it that froze Melissa's heart, and she knew then that Kuon Lo was dead. Adam took a gun from his pocket and fired one shot. To Melissa's ears it sounded like a small cannon, and Kuon Lo collapsed like a discarded puppet. Adam walked casually across the heli-pad and heaved the dying man to his knees. Then he drew his own sword and beheaded the Korean with surgical efficiency.

Stunned, Melissa gaped at Adam's dark shape. For all the years she'd browsed the Watcher's database, seen the vid-clips, and latterly watched Robert kill, somehow the calm ruthlessness of the execution was one of the most shocking scenes she'd witnessed. Made doubly so by the fact that this was no ancient, but a man who'd been a researcher for over ten years and immortal for a scant handful.

The quickening struck, wrapping its eldritch magic around him, and Melissa hesitated, her Browning half-raised. Kill him, now! her instincts screamed, shoot him and release Robert. Cut off his head with his own sword! But she didn't. He was more useful alive, her mind insisted. Cautiously she backed away, groping behind her with her free hand to find the doorframe.

Melissa intended to get off the stairs at the first chance she got, and as she reached the door on the next level down, she heard his footsteps coming swiftly behind her. Heart jumping in her chest, Melissa wrenched the door open and dived into the corridor. There was a room opposite and she stopped outside it, rooting through her purse as if searching for a key.

Adam strode past her and she glanced up. For a split second their eyes met. His expression was--strange; a combination of narrowed-eyed fury and something that might almost be exaltation, obviously an after-effect of the quickening. Then he was out of sight and Melissa relaxed with a gasp of relief. Her hands were shaking now, and she was tempted to abandon her plans to tail him. Duncan, she knew, was dangerous in ways that poor Robert could never have been, but she hadn't expected Adam to be so coldly lethal.

The temptation was crushed, and she followed him. Soon Melissa was glad she hadn't given in to it. Adam went to a hotel near the airport, and stayed there until morning. She kept watch from another across the street, and then she followed him to the airport. She lost him when he boarded a private jet. There was no way for her to know its destination, but Melissa was confident there was only one place he could be heading: Paris.
Methos went straight from the airport to Le Blues bar, from there to the Bichat Hospital in the north of Paris. Dawson had collapsed within minutes of him leaving to fly out to Vienna, and was still in intensive care. Methos smooth-talked his way into the small room off the main ward, and didn’t let his shock show as he took in the frailty of the man lying on the bed. Monitors displayed heart rate and blood pressure; an auto-feed drip was attached to his arm and an oxygen mask hung beside the bed, ready for use if needed.

"You didn't get my messages," he said quietly as Dawson's eyes focussed on him.

"What messages?" Even his voice sounded thin and flat. But that would be the medication he was on.

"The nice nurse is going to hold your hand and make sure the news doesn't finish you off," Methos said brightly, and the nice nurse shot him a glance. "Of course, if you'd actually dropped a hint or two that your ticker was liable to explode without warning, I--"

"Monsieur Pierson." The edge to the nurse's voice told that she wasn’t inclined to be that nice. Methos gave her the sweetest of his Adam smiles but she didn’t mellow.

"Sorry," he said. "I'll save the nagging until he's out of here. Good news, Joe. It was an impostor in Vienna."

In spite of the meds, the reading on the monitor's screen jumped.

"Truth?" Dawson demanded.

"Truth," Methos said. "I don't know where he is, but I am one hundred per cent certain it wasn't him. Mind you, when I do catch up with him, I'll make him regret the day he was born," he added bitterly. Dawson didn't answer. His eyes were squeezed shut and a single trail of moisture trickled into his hair.

The nurse checked the now stable read-outs again, then fixed Methos with a gaze as straight as his sword-blade. "Five minutes, Monsieur. No more shocks, if you please."

"There won't be," he said. "That was the important message, and he needed to hear it as soon as possible."

"Damn-right," Dawson whispered. "Buddy, if you're bullshitting me--"

"No. I don't think he was ever in Vienna. It was just a young smart-arse idiot who thought he could cash in on Mac's rep," he continued as the nurse silently left.

"So where is he?"

"I don't know." He paused briefly. "Joe, what do you want to do about this?" While he was talking, he moved to the foot of the bed and read the notes on the clipboard that hung there. He frowned, eyes narrowing, mouth thinning to a dangerous line.

"Do about what?"

"MacLeod isn't dead. The Watchers think he is."

Dawson lay silent and unmoving, and for a moment Methos thought he'd drifted into sleep--or
unconsciousness. Carefully he touched his fingers to the man's throat, felt the pulse throbbing.

"I'm okay," Dawson muttered. Then opened his eyes. "Did I ever show you the note Mac left for me, just before he disappeared?"

"No."

"Inside pocket of my jacket. In the closet."

Methos found the letter, read it in silence. "There are no answers, Joe," he said quietly. "There's nothing out there for him to find."

"I know that. You know that. But this is Duncan MacLeod, and you know how stubborn he is. It's been five fucking years--could take him another five--or fifty--before he bends that neck of his and admits it. He needs the time, Methos," he went on, a note close to pleading in his voice. "He's taken some deep wounds, and I don't mean physical. He's taken some incredibly powerful quickenings. Surely you've been there? Okay, you're five thousand years old, but you can remember what it was like when you were his age, can't you?"

"Joe," he said almost gently, "I was never that young. He will be back. MacLeod isn't a loner, and he knows it. He needs his people, and that means you. He'll have his time. Now," he went on crisply, "care to tell me when you had your first heart attack, and why you never mentioned it?"

"Hey, it was nothing to sweat about," Dawson protested. "Just a shot across the bows. A warning, that's all."

"Like this one?"

"Yeah."

"Have you forgotten how many times I've been a doctor?"

"Uh…."

"Think I don't know how to read charts? Then there's this code written at the bottom. Do you know what it means?"

"Yeah!" Aggressively. "So what?"

"So maybe your friends should know as well. 'Terminal. At patient's request do not resuscitate.' Given you walk out of here this time, how long, Joe? Weeks? Months?"

"Yeah. About that. Let it be, Methos. It's what us mortals do. So deal with it."

"I suppose I deserve that remark," he said acidly, "but don't push your luck."

"Are you going to look for him?"

"No. You decided he had to have his time. He's got it."

"Methos, the chronicles--"

"What of them?"

The nurse came back in, determination on her face.
"Mac's--my private ones. Make sure he gets them, not the Society."

"Sure. Where are they?"

Dawson relaxed back on his pillows and smiled at him. "You know damn-well where I keep them. Don't tell me you haven't read 'em," he drawled, "because you ain't that good a liar."

Methos smiled back, genuine warmth and affection reaching his eyes and softening the granite.

"Conniving bastard," he said.

"Takes one to know one." Dawson snickered, clearly pleased at getting in the last word.

Methos gave him a salute, acknowledging the small victory, and left.

He walked out of the ward, out of the hospital, and went back to his hotel. Since he had left Dawson's bedside, his face had shown the world nothing but a bland disinterest, and that didn't change as he walked into his room, closed the door and punched his right fist at the wall, leaving a bright smear of blood on the white paint, and breaking bones as well as plaster-over-brick. Another failing life, another approaching death to accept-- "It's what we do...." he whispered.

###

Melissa caught the first available flight to Paris, booked into a cheap hotel not far from Le Blues Bar, and went to the bar for a coffee and a reconnaissance.

Joseph wasn't there, and there was no sign of Adam. She was hours behind him of course, always assuming she'd guessed right and he was in Paris. He could have come to the bar and gone on to God-knows-where and she'd never find him. Melissa killed that thought, refusing to accept the possibility. What might be more of a potential problem was the chance that Adam might recognise her from Vienna.

Joseph didn't put in an appearance. Eventually Melissa went back to her hotel and made a phone call to the bar. If he was on vacation, absent for whatever reason, perhaps the bartender could be coaxed into telling her.

"Could I speak to Joseph, please?" she said in her careful French.

"I'm sorry, Mademoiselle, he is still the hospital. Can I give him a message?"

"Hospital?" she gasped, shocked and concerned. "No! What happened? Is it serious?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle, it's his heart, but he is stable."

"He always has worked too hard, worried too much," she said with a sigh. "I must send him a card, some fruit. Which hospital is he in?" She wrote down the reply, then after a few more chatty pleasantries, she hung up.

Worrying though Joseph's condition was, at least she knew he wasn't going anywhere. Adam was another matter. Perhaps he would stay around while Joseph was so ill.

Finding Adam was, for once, easy. There was always people coming and going through the
hospital's forecourt. Melissa just had to hang around, an unflattering scarf over her hair and wrapped around her lower face. Given the weather and temperature, she wasn’t the only one wrapped up against January’s elements.

Adam came out, face calm, serene, and Melissa gave a sigh of relief. The immortal was showing no signs of worry or distress, so perhaps Joseph wasn’t so seriously ill after all.

###

Within days of signing the house contract, all the Dubosc workforce had volunteered themselves and their families as jobbing laborers, and MacLeod had received phone calls from the rugby team as word had spread.

Nor was it only hands-on help that had been offered; Thierry's nephew worked for a double-glazing firm in Cherbourg and had brokered him a good deal. Yves' granddaughter was the PA to a company director of a business in Rouen specializing in solar generators, and her sister worked for a central heating firm in Deauville. All three businesses promised fast completion dates.

The weeks passed, December came and went, and slowly the House of the Lanterns emerged from its old shell. A combination of contracted specialists, workmen and willing volunteers had transformed the interior to light, airy rooms, warm and welcoming. Plumbing and electrics had all been upgraded, the solar panels were in and functioning, and with his own hands, MacLeod had built a fireplace and chimney in what would be the study. Only the double-glazing waited on completion. It had seemed to MacLeod that he only had to mention an idea or an ambition for his new home and someone had known someone who came up with exactly what was needed.

Madeleine Dubosc had accepted him as readily as her husband had done, and treated him with the same affectionate familiarity she gave to Matthieu and Jean-Michel. Simone Pasquier had adopted him as a surrogate brother, spending as much time with him as she could over Christmas and the New Year. That had initially caused a problem with Matthieu, but MacLeod had said nothing, done nothing, just let the younger man work it out for himself. It hadn't taken him long, and by the time she returned to her university for the next term, Matthieu and Simone were an accepted couple.

The financial deal between MacLeod and Gervais was signed and sealed, and quietly celebrated. Plans for the development of the boatyard were endlessly, and sometimes hotly, debated. Winter deepened its hold, Madeleine birthed a daughter and she was christened Stéphanie Marie, and they moved back to their home in Flamanville. All in all, life progressed as normal in that part of Normandy. Except for the small kernel of disquiet that had lodged itself in MacLeod's head.

The eye of the hurricane was passing over them. Soon the storm would break.

###

Jack Carston bided his time. He'd had the name for twenty-odd years now, and it was approaching his self-imposed deadline to move on. Plans for that had been in place from the moment he'd assumed the identity, and the Pasquier/Dubosc fiasco had merely brought it forward a handful of years. Not much in the general scheme of things, but Carston didn’t like having his hand forced.
So Gervais Dubosc was right at the top of the list marked 'Unfinished Business'. Such loose ends would be tidied away before he pulled the plug on Carston and became James Tremayne.

Patric Theroux had a grudge as well, though it was directed more toward the Bouvins and one in particular. Sven Anders also had an axe to grind. He was not used to being so summarily defeated, especially by a smaller, lighter man. Broken bones healed a lot easier than damaged pride.

Theroux’s grudge started him asking questions, and he brought the answers to St Helier and Carston's office.

"His name is Duncan MacLeod," Theroux said, and Carston stilled. "He's a Bouvin. There's a tribe of Bouvin-Dubosc-Scottish hybrids in a place called Trois Rivières in Quebec. It's north of Montreal," he added helpfully. "In Canada."

"I know where it is," Carston said, keeping the snap out of his voice. Duncan MacLeod. A common enough name in communities with Scottish links, so there was no reason to jump to wild conclusions, especially when rumors stated categorically the man was dead, killed in Vienna.

"Though there's a lot of people saying he's Pierre Bouvin's bastard son," Theroux went on.

"How sure are you he's related?" Carston demanded.

"As sure as I can be. Jean-Michel and Matthieu both say he's family, and old Pierre isn't denying it. The Duboscs certainly treat him like he's kin. There's another thing. He's going to be moving into the Lanterns when it's finished, not Gervais Dubosc. Someone is spending a small fortune on that house, and Dubosc is talking about refurbishing the boatyard. I can't find out here he's getting the money from."

Some of the tension went out of Carston. "I wonder," he said softly, "if I have a rival? Could be he's planning on setting up his own import-export business. Dubosc wouldn't have to hire in muscle when he could call on this Canadian offshoot. We'll have to keep a close eye on him, Patric. One thing's for sure, if he is going into my line of work, he won't want the Police Judiciaire paying close attention to him."

"So we can start getting heavy-handed again?" Theroux said hopefully.

Carston smiled. "Maybe, but not yet. Watch only, Patric, and there's no need to be subtle about it. We'll play him at his own game, see how he likes it. But no confrontations, no insults, fists or bricks, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

There were two more living shipments Carston had to collect, and the house might not be completely beyond his reach for a while yet. By day it was occupied by one or more workers, but the days were short and the nights long and cold. Maybe he could risk sending a motorboat from either the Halcyon or the Ariadne into the tiny bay late at night. His contact could get to the house by two in the morning, make the pick-up, and no one would be any the wiser. It was taking a chance, but Carston thrived on chances, especially when the pay-off was substantial.

###
MacLeod woke up one night in January and suddenly realized just how deeply entwined his roots had become with this Normandy community. It was heart-warming and quietly terrifying, and for a moment something like panic gripped him.

He should get out, fast. Just go. Before they snared him any further. It would hurt, but the longer he stayed, the more difficult it would be to move on. He couldn't afford to be so close to so many people. He would be safer in a city: another anonymous stranger quietly living his life, unnoticed and affecting no one.

But he couldn't do it.

Here, it seemed as if all of Flamanville and most of Surtainville knew him by face and by name. He was Duncan MacLeod, yes, but more often he was the Sensei, the Other Bouvin. And, to the delighted hilarity of the younger elements among the Dubosc and Bouvin clans, old Pierre's Wild Oat. He was the new winger on the team, fast and tricky and with sure hands on a mud-slick rugby ball, a calm head on young shoulders, and quick to snatch a try or a drop-kick out of nowhere.

He'd become an integral part of this extended clan, and it felt very good. But it proved both a blessing and a curse. Margot, ever the Matriarch ruling with a rod of iron, had dropped her bombshell.

"Duncan," she'd said, closing the kitchen door behind her, "that letter to M'sieur Dawson. Have you decided what you're doing with it?"

"Uh, well," he'd answered cautiously, "I don't want him involved if Carston starts to cause problems again. I thought I'd wait--"

"An excuse," she'd snapped. "I've given you time to come to your senses, or build up your courage, and you haven't done either. I won't let you wound yourself and your friends this way any longer. The letter has gone, Duncan. I posted it this morning."

He'd glared at her, angry and ashamed, his colour high. She'd faced him down, hands on her hips, physically dwarfed by his height, but by no means intimidated, and he'd been routed.

For a while after Margot had posted the letter, MacLeod had known a mixture of trepidation and hope. By the end of the second week, both had faded and an ache of loss had taken its place. Now he felt oddly numb.

Silently MacLeod got out of bed and dressed, and equally quietly let himself out of the farmhouse. The moon was half-full, flooding the frosty night with pale light. He stood in the yard for a moment, gazing up at it, his breath small pennants in the still air. Then he got into his car and drove to the Lanterns.

Well-oiled now, the front door opened smoothly, and he stepped inside to warmth and moonlight pooled beneath the great skylight. The smell of fresh paint had almost faded, but the place was still an unfurnished cavern. The slightest sound awakened whispering echoes.

MacLeod wasn't entirely sure why he was there. To confirm, maybe, that he had done the right thing in buying it. But he already knew that. A sense of waiting hung poised in the empty house, a feeling that had nothing to do with the foreboding of trouble ahead. No threat or oppression, just--waiting.

The house wasn't entirely dark. MacLeod didn't switch on the lights. With the moonlight streaming through the skylights, he didn't have to. He went up to the study, and sat cross-legged in
the wash of white that flooded down from the clear dome above, and relaxed. The tension that had tighten his muscles eased off, and it came to him then that no matter what happened, this place was a constant. Like his island, though not holy ground. It was a haven. Just as Dominique had said.

The fireplace caught his attention, and he smiled. Although he'd tested the draw of the chimney with burning paper, he hadn't lit a proper fire there yet. That could wait for a while. Until he could sit here with a glass of red wine and watch the flames, and pour a libation to whichever god watched the backs of very old immortals.

Something from his childhood came to him then, a memory of old tales and customs that had little to do with the kirk by the loch. They were nothing more than superstitions, he knew, but still he acted on the impulse. There was plenty of dead wood in the garden, and off-cuts of timber from the various refurbishments. There was a quarter of a bottle of Pierre’s homemade cider in the new fridge, a selection of mugs, and a copy of yesterday's Le Figaro newspaper.

Quickly MacLeod gathered all he needed, then he took out his pocket-knife and cut his hand, letting the blood drip onto the hearth. He'd already shed blood in the house, he acknowledged, but that had been an accident and over the last few months he hadn't been the only one to have painful mishaps. This was different. He built the small fire over the dark stains and lit the screwed up paper in the heart of it. The flames quickly took hold of the wood and soon it was giving out a steady glow of heat. He cut his hand again, and the fire hissed as his blood fell into it.

"Blood above and below and within," he whispered in Gaelic. "Hearth-fire, heart-fire, life-fire. I am Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod." Then he took a drink of cider, threw the rest into the fire. "Methos," he said, an ache inside his chest. "Keep him safe."

###

Just outside the tiny bay, Carston stood on the Halcyon's deck with field-glasses to his eyes. He watched the thin spiral of smoke from the new chimney and swore. Someone was in the house, though not a light showed. He reached for his cell phone and made the abort call. The drop would be rescheduled.

Carston frowned. Was this Duncan MacLeod the immortal article, or just another mortal of the same name? There was one way to be sure, but he wasn’t prepared to risk alerting an immortal that another of his kind was in the area. Not yet, at any rate, when his operations would be put at risk. Afterward, all bets would be off, whether MacLeod was immortal or not.

###

MacLeod sat there until the small fire burnt itself out and the moon no longer lit the room, until dawn was lightening the sky and glinting on the frosted glass.
Chapter 13

That's Anders," Thierry said quietly, peering over Yves' shoulder. "What's he doing in here?" The wine bar in the heart of Surtainville was busy, and the Dubosc work-force was crowded into their usual corner. Then the big Swede moved and Patric Theroux came into view. "Damn!"

Yves took a quick glance round then shrugged. "The Fleurie's a public place, for God's sake. People we don't like are allowed in here."

"What?" Jean-Michel's head came up. "Who?"

"Trouble," Matthieu said gleefully, starting to his feet.

MacLeod got a grip on his belt and pulled him back into his seat.

"Which we are not going to start," he said evenly.

The flurry of movement caught Theroux's attention, maybe because he was waiting for it, MacLeod guessed. The man raised his beer glass in a salute, then turned his back on them. Anders continued to glare across the room, pale blue eyes fixed on MacLeod, but he made no move to approach.

The next night, Theroux, Anders and a couple of others were at Le Semaphore. Again, there was no confrontation between the two camps, though the tension could be cut with a blunt blade.

At the weekend, Theroux was in the crowd, cheering on the Flamanville team as it beat Bréval 16-4 in the usual sea of mud.

"What kind of game is Carston playing?" Gervais demanded, confronting MacLeod in the showers after the match. "That's three times in as many days his goons have been hanging around!"

"It's called psychological warfare," MacLeod said, digging dirt out of his ears. Bréval's tactics for the last half had been to tackle him to the ground every time he had the ball and the resulting mauls had left him plastered in mud from head to foot. Matthieu wasn't in a much better state.

"I guessed that much," Gervais snapped. "The question is, why? He hasn't finished with us, has he?"

"Apparently not. But so far he hasn't done anything against Henri's ultimatum. Maybe he's just trying to make us sweat."

"Well, he's succeeding. Do you think that's all it is? Needling just to let us know he could hit hard if he wanted to?"

"Probably," MacLeod said, and couldn't ignore the growing unease in his gut. The storm clouds were deepening, coming closer. "But in case it isn't, the hotheads will have to be sat on."

"My thoughts exactly. I'll have a chat with everyone, but you watch Matthieu and I'll watch Jean-Michel. Between the two of us, we should be able to keep them out of trouble."

And Margot had posted Joe's letter. Not the best timing Fate could have come up with. MacLeod forced a smile. "No problem," he said.
Theroux and Anders continued to show up at the wine bar or the restaurant. There was no trouble, no contact of any kind. The two men didn't even make it obvious they were watching the Duboscs and Bouvins. Theroux usually gave them a nod, or a raised glass, but that was all.

Then a piece of news filtered through the gossip network, and Yves' wife phoned the boatyard to pass it along: Patric Theroux and Sven Anders were out of work. Carston had fired them, but no one knew why.

The unease among the Dubosc workforce grew. "Loose cannons," Yves muttered, summing it up in two words. "It's a front so they can carry out his dirty work with no comeback on him."

"Because he knows as well as we do," Jean-Michel snarled, pacing the small office. "that the families won't go against him until someone gets killed! And if he doesn't know it, he will soon enough!"

"So we make sure we don't play into his hands!" Gervais drew himself up to his full height. Not a tall man, he was physically imposing when he wanted to be. "We’ll be patient and bide our time. Sooner or later he'll over-reach himself, or Theroux will, and the law can step in without Henri's letter being an issue."

"But--" Jean-Michel began and Gervais rounded on him.

"Fuck it, Bouvin!" he snapped, "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you!"

"Yes, Boss." Jean-Michel held up a hand in surrender and subsided, slouching into his chair with a scowl darkening his face.

"It might be a coincidence he's turning up where we are. This isn't a large town, after all," Gervais continued. "We'll meet up at the Auberge Fleurie as usual this evening. If Theroux's there, we leave and go to Le Sémaphore. If he follows us, then he's deliberately trying to provoke us. We stay put and we ignore him." A simmering silence was all the reply he got, but it was enough. "Now let's pack up and go home to our dinners. I, for one, am starving."

Easing bruised muscles, Rees Evans sank a little lower in his seat and tried to keep his eyes open. The coach had left Barneville-Carteret at some ungodly hour, heading for Cherbourg and the next match, but a pile-up on the D904 had forced a diversion along narrow country roads. The coach was hot—close to too hot—and smelt of beer, sweat, aftershave and garlic. Odours he had become used to over the three weeks of the tour. He'd been doubtful about taking the month off his day job, but right now was very glad he had. As loosehead prop and assistant physiotherapist, he'd been more than useful to his local rugby club, the Wrexham Dragons, but mostly he’d had a ball until an injury had sidelined him.

They were halfway through a tour of Normandy, visiting the amateur rugby clubs who’d put together a couple of teams and toured Wales last year. For two weeks now, they'd been renewing friendships and rivalries, and generally having a bloody good time.
For Evans, who spent a lot of his working days in libraries, museums and archives in a variety of locations, most of them dusty, this was a much-needed release. He was a freelance researcher, he told anyone who asked what his job was, and up to a point, it was the truth. But he wasn’t a freelance. Rees Evans was a Watcher, but his expertise wasn’t in fieldwork. His métier was research. His one experience of an immortal duel in all its bloody detail had convinced him that such barbarity didn’t belong in the 21st century. But then, neither did quite a few of the immortals currently alive.

Evans had a photographic memory and an instinct for old records, diaries, letters. He’d turned up some useful nuggets of information, and had filled in a few significant gaps in some chronicles. Certain individuals fascinated him: Amanda Darieux, for instance, and he knew her chronicles word for word, picture by picture, video-clip by video-clip. Her chronicles, therefore, included those she associated with, friends and lovers as well as enemies. Which was why, as they drove through Surtainville on the way back to the main road, his double-take nearly gave him whiplash. He turned in his seat and stared after the man who’d just come out of the boulangerie.

The coach was stopped at a junction, and Evans had plenty of time to watch him walk down the street, cross over and disappear down an alley. He was a tall man with long dark hair tied back in a ponytail, and a distinctive smooth stride that had always made him think of a large feline. Specifically it reminded him of a panther, supple and swift and deadly, except that this particular panther was a headless corpse. He'd seen the reports just before the tour started, and had grieved for Amanda's sake.

No, he had to be mistaken. He hadn’t gotten more than a fleeting glimpse of the man's face, enough to know he was white euro with the warm skin-tone that never seemed to lose a suntan. Had to be his imagination. After all, tall dark-haired men were ten a penny on the continent, and anyone who practiced martial arts to a great extent would have that same fluid poise.

By the time the coach reached Les Pieux, Evans had convinced himself he was wrong. Hans Kruller had been a Watcher for years. And while Kuon Lo's Watcher hadn't had Kruller's long experience, she was damn-good at her job. He simply wouldn't make that kind of mistake. Kruller had heard the challenge, for God's sake, not once, but three times; "I am Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod, and I've come for your head." And that last battle had been quite an epic, though the videos of it had been rendered indistinct by driving rain.

Two martial arts masters had fought with the kind of savage grace that most movies only hinted at, and Kuon Lo's ultimate victory hadn’t been entirely certain until the last moments. Not that he'd had much chance to enjoy his success. Someone had left his Watcher unconscious, and an unknown opponent had shot and beheaded him.

But Duncan MacLeod was unarguably, incontrovertibly dead.

So Rees Evans cursed himself as he said goodbye to his team-mates and limped away with his luggage to hire a car. His cover story was neatly feasible and had been greeted with enthusiasm: that he should spend time checking out some of the other local teams that hadn't previously visited Wales. Admittedly, he wasn't exactly leaving his team-mates in the lurch. The pulled thigh muscle would have kept him out of the next few matches in any case, and he might even be able to arrange some fixtures for a tour next year, but that wasn't the point. He was dumping another couple of weeks of happy drinking with like-minded blokes to chase up a figment of his imagination.

###
Theroux wasn’t at the Auberge Fleurie, but the atmosphere turned uncharacteristically somber and the evening broke up earlier than usual. Yves and Thierry had had enough and were heading home. Jean-Michel intended to go on to Le Sémaphore, and Gervais opted to keep him company. Matthieu was reluctant to leave from the Auberge Fleurie, and MacLeod stayed with him. But moments after the others had left, Matthieu changed his mind.

"Hey, Sensei," he said, "why don't we finish the night up on the Cap as well?" He wasn't drunk, MacLeod judged, but he wasn't exactly sober, either, and Theroux might be at Le Sémaphore.

"Sure," MacLeod agreed, though he would sooner have gone back to Flamanville and his bed. He had other things on his mind, such as the man who'd watched him go in and out of the boulangerie that morning, and had followed him for a while.

MacLeod had used a shop window as a mirror and studied the area behind him. There weren't a lot of people about, and his instinct had homed in on one figure. Across the street, the stocky, red-haired stranger had developed a sudden interest in a news-stand. Every instinct had told him this was either one of Carston's heavies, and he'd had the build for it, or more likely a Watcher. Carston didn't need to have him tailed; he knew where MacLeod worked, where he lived. The Watchers were another matter.

MacLeod had given up expecting a reply from Joe Dawson, but Joe could have alerted them as soon as he got MacLeod's letter. For a moment, a sense of betrayal had fueled his anger, but then commonsense stepped in. What else was Joe supposed to do? The man was a Watcher, regardless of any personal friendship, and he'd crossed the loyalty line enough times in the past to help out. He couldn't be expected to do it just for the asking every time Duncan MacLeod found it inconvenient to have a Watcher on his back.

On a point of principle, though, MacLeod had shed his unwanted shadow among the maze of backstreets, and gone back to the boatyard without picking up another one.

So, the Watchers knew where he was and it would only be a matter of time before they'd traced him to the boatyard, the farm and his house. More to the point, what was he going to do about it? Leave, or accept the inevitable loss of privacy before he was ready, and go back to living under a microscope? Neither prospect appealed, but until he was 100% certain the Carston mess was cleaned up, he was going nowhere. MacLeod muttered a curse under his breath, drained his beer glass, returned it to the bar and followed Matthieu out into the cold night. At least Redhead hadn’t followed him tonight.

"Aren't you moving in this weekend?" Matthieu asked, slouching along with his hands in his pockets. They turned down the poorly lit alleyway, the short cut to the boatyard and Matthieu's motorbike. The others were out of sight ahead of them; MacLeod could hear Jean-Michel's voice raised in song.

"I was," he said, "but there's been a hitch in the double-glazing. The frames for the last skylight aren't ready yet. Some idiot got the measurements round the wrong way at the factory and they've had to remake the panels. It'll be another couple of weeks."

"Isn't it always the way?" Matthieu sighed.

"Hey, it's the only hitch so far." MacLeod grinned. "That has to be a minor miracle in its own right."
Matthieu gave a snort of laughter. "That's true."

MacLeod chuckled. "In fact," he began, then heard a footstep behind him. Belatedly his instincts kicked in and he was turning as the crowbar scythed into the side of his knee. Bone cracked and he went down like a felled tree, his head striking hard on the stones. As he sprawled, the crowbar swung again, for his ribs this time. Sick with pain and half-stunned as he was, he could do nothing to block it.

Matthieu had been pushed to his knees by a powerful shove in the back, and he surged upright with a howl of outrage. "Anders!" He lashed out with fists and feet, sending the attacker staggering back a few paces. Then the man ducked a swinging punch and ran, fast despite his bulk. Matthieu went after him like an unleashed wolfhound, baying the man's name.

Shuddering and nauseous with pain, MacLeod dragged himself into the small courtyard that had hidden his ambusher, and curled up in the darkest corner. Running footsteps heralded the arrival of the Seventh Cavalry, and they didn't stop. They followed Matthieu, and MacLeod let out a bubbling gasp of relief. Broken ribs speared into his lung at every breath and he was fighting a losing battle against unconsciousness. Blood flooded his mouth, choking him. He coughed and pain flowered, combining with the separate agony of his smashed knee to send him spiraling towards oblivion.

###

"Sensei?" Gervais' voice pulled him back from a vast distance. "Duncan? Where are you hurt? Yves, here, use my phone--call an ambulance!"

"No," MacLeod said through the dull ache of healed flesh and bone, "I'm okay, just winded. Matthieu--"

"I'm here. It was Anders! I lost him this time, but--"

"No buts. I'm okay." MacLeod sat up, grateful that the torment was easing and his body had repaired itself before they'd come back for him.

"Matthieu said Anders hit you with a crowbar," Thierry said. "Stay put, let me check your knee."

"He misjudged in the dark," MacLeod said, then winced and groaned as Thierry's hands moved carefully over his leg. "The cobbles took the worst of it, thank God."

"What about your side?" Matthieu said, worry in his voice. "Sensei, he could have killed you!"

Before MacLeod could stop him, Thierry began to unbutton his jacket. The weight of the billhook dragged at the fabric. "What the--?" Thierry frowned, and pulled the thing out of its sewn-in sheath.

"Insurance," MacLeod croaked, and coughed, gasping with a pain that wasn't entirely faked. "He hit that, not me." Anders hadn't, but if the gods were kind, Matthieu wouldn't have noticed in the darkness and confusion.

"You are one lucky son of a bitch," Gervais said, shaking his head in wonder.
"So was that Anders acting on his own initiative?" Jean-Michael demanded. "Or was it Anders acting on Carston's orders? I say it's Carston and we give Philippe Roussel Henri's letter!"

"Carston sacked Anders, remember?" Yves said heavily. "He's covered his back and we're no further forward--still no proof! Duncan, are you sure you don't want the ambulance?"

"I'm sure." He got to his feet with Gervais' and Thierry's assistance, gingerly put weight on his leg and limped a few steps. "No, I'll be fine. I've had knocks as bad on the rugby field. If Thierry can strap it for me, that'll be good enough."

###

Once back in Surtainville, Evans found himself a room in a fairly modern hotel on the outskirts of the small town, and spent the rest of the day exploring. It was a nice place, a thriving community with a marina and a small harbor that reminded him of Honfleur, and stretches of wide sandy beaches that would be busy in the summer.

Evans had paid particular attention to the boulangerie of Marcel Leconte, and the next morning was strolling casually down the street at about the same time he'd seen his quarry. He'd worked off the assumption that if the man lived locally he'd get his bread from the same place at the same time. If he'd been just passing through, then he, Evans, was just wasting his time and would have no problem catching up with his coach.

But he wasn't wasting his time. A tall figure came out of the alley, crossed the street in front of him and entered the shop. Evans lounged near the door and heard the cheerful, "Ah, bonjour, Duncan, ça va?"

"Bien, merci," the man said with an answering smile. He wore a bulky jacket with a design of a stylized wave and seagull in blue on the back, and a navy woolen hat pulled down low over his forehead. Evans had no trouble recognizing him. MacLeod was scruffy, unshaven, but seen in the flesh there was something about him that drew the eye, something the computer images couldn't duplicate.

In his hotel room that night, Rees Evans did a lot of thinking. He'd gone online again and once more watched the contest in Vienna. Then he called up an earlier file on MacLeod, and played through the fight with Steven Keane all the way up to the final sword-stroke. Then he watched the Vienna clips again.

The Vienna face wasn't clear enough to compare, but the physical poise, movement, and body language, were all subtlety different. Furthermore, the Vienna MacLeod had possessed a slight swagger to his shoulders that neither the Surtainville MacLeod nor Keane's MacLeod had possessed.

Now he was in a quandary. On the one hand his Watcher Oath demanded that he immediately report the sighting. On the other, if this was the real MacLeod, had the man set up some kid to take his place, die for him? Or was he completely oblivious to the fact that, a] he had an impostor and, b] he was now listed as dead. If Vienna was a set-up, why was he here in Surtainville and using his own name? It would make more sense to have created a new ID and not settled anywhere in France, a country Duncan MacLeod was known to have a preference for given the amount of time he spent there.
All of it suggested that MacLeod had no idea about Vienna. So, given that he was a Researcher, with nothing other than basic field training, what to do? If MacLeod spotted him and guessed that he’d been picked up by the Watchers, he’d disappear again. But who the hell had been calling himself Duncan MacLeod of the bloody Clan MacLeod, and why? For the kudos?

He needed to talk to someone--unofficially--get some advice. There was always Joe Dawson, a man of some reputation and MacLeod's ex-Watcher. Of course, that reputation wasn’t all good. Dawson had committed the unthinkable sin and become close friends with an immortal. Worse, said immortal was fully aware of the Watchers, what they did and why they did it. There were rumors that hinted at darker transgressions, but Evans didn't pay much attention to gossip. Even so, maybe he'd better be absolutely sure of his facts before he talked to anyone, reported anything. Tomorrow he'd return, and this time he'd find out where MacLeod spent his days.

###

Evans was back watching the boulangerie from a safe distance the following morning, but MacLeod didn’t show up. There was a man who looked a lot like him at first glance; tall, dark, ponytail. But he didn't move the same way, and looked to be in his early twenties. However, he was wearing the same kind of heavy jacket, with the same motif across the back. So Evans tailed him instead.

The man led him to the small marina and disappeared through a gate bearing the same logo as his jacket. A boatyard. Evans went into a conveniently sited bookshop and browsed the shelves by the window, but his substitute quarry didn't emerge again, and neither did MacLeod show up. Evans sighed, admitted temporary defeat, bought a book and went to find himself a late lunch. He would come back in the afternoon for another look around. All he needed was a confirmation for his report and then he'd settle for the odd daily check. After all, this wasn't a proper assignment, just a precautionary surveillance.

A couple of hours later, Evans was back outside the bookshop. He casually turned his back on the boatyard, content to watch it via its reflection in the window.

The afternoon was closing in, and he was chilled to the bone. Occasionally he'd gone back into the shop to browse and buy another book, and the two youngsters who worked there clearly thought he fancied one of them. The girl and the boy simpered at him, until he retreated to the street again. And still he hadn’t identified MacLeod. Then the reflection in the window gave him another chance; two tall men, woolen hats pulled down over their foreheads, made bulky by their heavy jackets, were carrying a large packing case toward the workshop. One of them was limping slightly, but he couldn’t tell if the other was MacLeod.

Evans was so intent on watching the pair that he didn't at first register the two men who joined him at the window. Then he realised they were standing uncomfortably close, their eyes fixed on him. He turned quickly and a hand closed on his arm.

"Monsieur," the man said. "Un moment, si vous plais? Parlez-vous Francais?"

"Uh, yes," Evans said in that language. "Is there a problem?" The man wasn't young and he wasn't tall, but he was as heavy-set as Evans himself, and looked like he could stop a charging rhino in its tracks.
"Yes, Monsieur. Come with us, please."

"I don't think so," Evans said mildly, settling his weight solidly on braced legs.

"Yes, Monsieur," said the man behind him, and something hard pressed against his spine just above his belt. It might be a gun-barrel, or it might not. Evans wasn't prepared to take the chance.

"I don't have much money on me," he said, "and my credit cards are back at my--"

"Just walk, Monsieur," said the first man. "Across the street to the yard. Since you're so interested in it, you can have a guided tour."

Gritting his teeth on his irritation, Evans obeyed, and he was ushered through the gate and into the workshop.

Another man followed them in, shutting the wide doors behind him. "Yves, Thierry, what's this?" he demanded.

"That's what we're going to find out, Boss. He followed Matthieu back from the boulangerie, hung around for the rest of the morning, now he's back again. Men with hair that colour shouldn't try to be invisible. It doesn't work. After what happened the other night, I think maybe it's time he answered some questions."

The two men left their packing case and joined the group. Evans glanced from one to the other, found his gaze pulled to meet a pair of angry and bitterly amused eyes and recognised Duncan MacLeod. To be the focus of the immortal's attention was surprisingly intimidating, and Evans knew he was in deep trouble. For a split second, he was tempted to make a break for it. Strong though he was, he wouldn't stand much of a chance against all of them together, and MacLeod's skill in the more esoteric martial arts was only too well documented. MacLeod couldn't have guessed he was a Watcher, but once the immortal got a glimpse of the tattoo on Evans' wrist he'd know and disappear again.

"That sounds like a good idea to me. I'm Gervais Dubosc, and I own this boatyard. Your name, Monsieur?"

"Rees Evans," he said.

"You won't mind if we check that, will you. Search him, Thierry."
Chapter 14

Joe Dawson was dying. Methos gave up trying to get to sleep. Instead he lay flat on his back in the darkness of his hotel room and contemplated that thought. It wasn’t a pleasant prospect, but was one he needed to meet head on and accept, because death could come for the man at any time now. The notes on Dawson's hospital chart were depressingly explicit, and the brief talk he'd had with the doctor just underlined the details. Cancer in the left lung, enlarged heart, hardened arteries; no chance of any kind of operation, just the possibility that a pacemaker might help regulate his heartbeat. Dawson had already vetoed the pacemaker.

However, Dawson's fast approaching death wasn’t the only issue he had to confront. There was also Duncan MacLeod and his place in Methos' life, and sooner or later he’d have to decide what to do about him. Because sooner or later MacLeod would come swanning back into circulation, probably with that wide-eyed kicked-pup expression that begged for forgiveness, or even the sullen jaw-jutting sulk that defied anyone to make something of it. Then there was the noble but suffering warrior martyring himself for the good of others. Methos knew them all.

Right now, Methos wanted to hammer all three versions into a bloody pulp, and the most annoying thing was, he had no one to blame but himself. He should never have let the man get under his skin. *Fuck it, you'd think that at five thousand and the gods knew how many years old, I'd be able to control my bloody hormones.* At least he'd been able to keep it in his pants this time, but that was about all.

Paris, March 1995

"Pierson?" The rich, gravel-rough voice seemed vaguely familiar. "It's Joe Dawson."

"What can I do for you?" he asked. He knew the name, they'd spoken a few times over the phone, and he knew the man's somewhat sullied reputation.

"This isn't an official call," Dawson said, "and I hate to have to spring this on you. Pierson, I've got some bad news."

"How bad?" he asked, feeling tension knotting in his stomach.

"The worst. There's no easy way, and I am not good at this. Don Salzer. I know you and he were pretty tight. I'm sorry. He's dead."

"He--? How?" He had to push the words out past numbed lips. Methos had spent years perfecting the art of distancing himself, easing through life in his own barricaded rut. He had more acquaintances than friends, but Don had gradually crossed the gap. Now he fought to distance himself from the man's death and exile the pain to the still, ice-cold wasteland that existed deep in his soul. "An accident? What happened? Christine--have you told his wife?"

"No accident, and she doesn't know yet," Dawson said. "He was murdered. You've heard of Kalas? He's on the hunt, and word has it he's looking for Methos. He's found out all about us, and he's already killed two Watchers trying to trace him. Now he almost certainly knows you're the resident expert, so you're in some danger."

"Who else did he kill?" he asked, his voice sounding strained to his own ears. 'Looking for Methos', three words that brought the reality of the immortal world back into brutal perspective.

"Roger Harris. I know this is going to be hard for you, Pierson," Dawson went on, his voice oddly
gentle. "Your best bet is a safe house, but before you go, can I ask for your help?"

"Ask." He swallowed the pain in his throat, forced some kind of coherence into his head. He'd thought himself safe for too long, to discover he wasn't froze him like a deer in the headlights, which was no way to survive for five minutes, let alone another five thousand years.

"I want to send a friend round for whatever information you can give that'll help him stop Kalas."

"He'll have to be quick. I'm going to be out of here faster than you'll believe. Who is he?"

There was a pause. "Uh, Duncan MacLeod," Dawson said cautiously.

"An immortal?" Methos yelped, outraged. "Are you crazy?"

"How else do you figure we're gonna stop Kalas?"

A sub-machine gun to cut him down and an axe to remove his head, sprang immediately to Methos' mind, but he didn't say so. Nausea churned in his stomach. For more than ten years the Society of Watchers had been a secure bolt hole, now he had two immortals heading his way and he'd lost a good friend to one of them. He started to protest, but all the weight of his years suddenly descended on him and he couldn't find the energy to care. "Oh, sure," he muttered. "Why the hell not? Send your pet immortal, Dawson. I'll be waiting for him. Tell him to make it fast. I am not hanging around."

Methos dropped the phone back on its rest, grabbed his trench coat and pulled it on, then hauled out a suitcase. He started to pack, but gave it up halfway through. What was the point? His sword still hung in the closet, a fine layer of dust over hilt and scabbard. He should haul it out and oil it more often. He hadn't used the weapon in combat for a couple of centuries, but he liked to keep it in good condition.

Maybe he could still salvage something from this unholy mess. All he had to do was convince MacLeod he was a simple researcher and neo-immortal with no wish to do anything but live among his books. He might even be able to persuade MacLeod not to spread it about that Adam Pierson was an immortal. Then MacLeod could take Kalas' head, report back to Maverick Dawson, and they'd all go their separate ways and live happily ever after.

Or something like that. Christine. Who would tell her? She and Don were so close.... Gods, what a mess. He scrubbed his fingers through his hair and dragged them down over his face, and wished he could summon up the enthusiasm for living he once had. "I'm getting old," he said aloud. His voice echoed in the empty apartment, emphasizing his aloneness. "Why the hell bother?" And knew he would at least try, because survival had become a habit.

Methos left the sword hanging on its hook and shut the closet door. It would, he insisted to himself, be moderately interesting to discover how gullible Duncan MacLeod was, and he remembered he enjoyed pitting his wits against the rest of humanity. Right now, though, it was impossible to find much in the way of interest in it.

So who was Duncan MacLeod? What made him tick? Methos' path had never crossed MacLeod's, although they were sometimes in the same part of the world at the same time. What little he knew about the man he'd gained from infrequent meetings with Amanda, and from Darius, both of whom thought the sun shone out of his arse. Amanda's words of wisdom had mainly centered on MacLeod's sexual prowess, stamina and inventiveness, which was not a lot of help in the present situation. Darius' opinion wasn't hormonally charged: a hundred or so years ago, he'd considered that MacLeod was a man of honor and integrity, with a great deal of potential. Potential for what,
he'd never actually said, as far as Methos could recall.

Somewhere in one of his own chronicles, he'd written down that conversation. It might be a good idea to refresh his memory, to read up on his prospective visitor. He rooted through his shelves until he found the book he needed, and then thought of creature comforts. A few minutes later, with a supply of beer, a Walkman and the book, he folded comfortably to the floor and began to read.

His sword remained in the closet, but there was, as usual, a gun in his coat pocket. Just in case Kalas arrived before Dawson's boy.

###

The nerve-jarring sense of Presence broke through Methos' concentration, and he looked up. MacLeod or Kalas? Whichever, it didn't matter much. He was either dead or he wasn't. He stayed where he was, attention back on the pages, the gun inches from his fingers.

The door opened. "You Adam Pierson?" A warm voice, speaking English with a slight accent that hovered somewhere in the mid-Atlantic between British and American, and Methos looked up. He found himself staring at a tall man with deep peat-brown eyes and long dark hair pulled back from an almost too handsome face. An oddly compelling vitality hung about him, a sensuality hinted at by the mouth and eyes. But more than that, he moved with the controlled power of a panther, hunting. The sword held poised in his hand was a katana, with the trademark grey silk-sheen rippling its unique pattern along the curved blade.

'Decorative and deadly,' burbled a slightly hysterical part of Methos' mind, 'man and weapon.' He stayed sitting on the floor, shuffling round on his backside until he faced MacLeod. He leaned back against the bed, playing the inoffensive, non-aggressive neo-immortal to the hilt.

Brown eyes met hazel, and a kind of recognition passed between them, more than the usual cautious acknowledgement of Presence. MacLeod was wary, a little uncertain, and Methos felt a sudden rush of something approaching elation. Perhaps MacLeod had the same sense of awareness. Life was beginning to look a little more interesting by the second. More to the point, this man may or may not prove to be gullible, but he was clearly not willing to leap straight in with his sword swinging. That could also be turned to Methos' advantage, in more ways than one.

"Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod," he said lightly by way of a greeting. Something had come to lodge under his ribs and it was interfering with his breathing. To break the self-induced spell and to set the man off-balance if he could, Methos reached across and snagged a beer-can, tossed it to MacLeod. "Have a beer. Mi casa es su casa."

MacLeod caught the can left-handed, without any loss of readiness. He stared at the can, a bemused expression on his face. Then he looked down at the man on the floor, and said the last thing that Methos expected to hear from him.

"Methos?" MacLeod sounded incredulous, doubting his own conclusion, and Methos wanted to laugh his delight aloud. It had been a long time, he acknowledged with a small, secretive smile. A long time since that heady, breathless exhilaration had hit him, and he relished it, no matter how transitory it might prove to be. For now it was enough that the weight of depression began to lift from his shoulders.
"Let's get out of here," he said, coming smoothly to his feet. "I don't want to be shut inside if Kalas is on his way."

###

They walked for hours, talking. MacLeod's curiosity—tinged a little with awe—was obvious, but the man handled it with a diplomatic skill that Methos appreciated.

He wouldn’t get involved with MacLeod, he decided. He’d keep his distance as always—no real relationship, just play with the idea that, if he chose, he could reel the younger man in. He, Methos, would be in control at all times. Okay, he was probably playing with fire, but that only added spice to the game.

There was an incandescence about this man, an elemental something that touched Methos' own private wasteland and brought a temporary warmth to the empty chill. It was a good feeling, intoxicating, and he acknowledged it could prove addictive if he wasn't careful.

MacLeod's sheer vitality gradually awakened his own. The man radiated a zest for life that reminded him of—Kronos, Methos suddenly realized. As if the two men were different sides of the same blade, one in shadow and rejoicing in death, the other vibrant and bright in the sun. While he, poor sod, danced the razor-sharp edge that separated them.

No. He rejected the image as preposterous, obscene. But it was a wave of ice-water crashing down on him and it jolted him to his senses, slammed him back to the real world where people died, times changed, and he dragged a mostly solitary existence from age to age. Now he was getting maudlin, he realized disgustedly. It simply wasn’t worth it.

"I'll stay close," MacLeod offered. Moments before, Methos would have taken him up on the offer, and woven a net so subtle the man wouldn't have known he was being seduced until Methos had him well and truly snared. Now he shook his head.

"You can't fight my battles for me, MacLeod," he said, and walked away.

"No," Methos said aloud, and sat up in bed. He'd done that too often for too long. Retreating. Playing safe. Running away. He pushed his hands through his hair, clenched them at the nape of his neck. Images and memories crowded in his brain, MacLeod and Kronos, Cassandra's laughter, "Kronos was a Vorarigni."

Methos sighed. He'd had a lot of hate and rage simmering inside him, all those ages of the world ago, dark energies Kronos had fed on and echoed back. For centuries they’d needed each other, catalyst and catharsis, before Silas, before Caspian. Then for more centuries the Horsemen had brought hell to earth. How long had it been? Numbly he totaled the years. A millennium. A thousand years, until Methos had realized he didn't need anymore.

"It's a rare gift, Methos! Very rare, and one you don't have. But Duncan MacLeod has it." He'd known the bitch lied, but just in case there might be a grain of truth in it, he'd tried to stay away. Tried and failed. Methos wrapped his arms around himself and curled forward, hugging his lodestone.

Ignifers, Fire-bearers, were indeed rare, be they Vorarigni like Kronos or Datorigni like Darius. Cassandra hadn't lied; she hadn't known the difference. He was the liar, trying to fool himself. A
Vorarigni didn't, couldn't, compel. Neither could their opposite number, and if MacLeod was a Datorigni, he was nowhere near as powerful as Darius had been. All Methos had to do was walk away, just as he had from Kronos. Walk away from the hearth-fire and the warm velvet cloak. He could do that. But he couldn't walk away from what was in his heart.

###

By visiting time the next day, Dawson's condition was improved, which meant the questions started as soon as Methos entered his room.

"So who was that guy?" Dawson demanded. "Have you searched the database for him before he started being Mac?"

"Shouldn't you be sedated?" Methos countered. "I'm sure I read Valium on your chart yesterday. Maybe they should double your dose."

"Smart-ass." Dawson smiled. "Just gimme some answers, will you? I got nothing to do but lie here and think, and it's driving me crazy. Where's my laptop?"

"I didn't bring it. This is not exactly a secure place to do Watcher research."

"But you have looked for him?"

"Joe, he's dead. He wasn't Mac. That's good enough for me."

"Well, it sure as shit isn't good enough for me!" Joe sniffed. "You used to be a Watcher, damn it! Who was he before he decided he was Duncan MacLeod? Why pick Mac and not Methos or Darius, or any of the famous legends? Why--"

"Because Darius is dead, Methos is a myth, not a legend, and no one knows where MacLeod is. He hasn't been spotted for years."

"That could be it," Dawson said. "So this kid, who came out of nowhere, either knew Mac, or he hacked into the Watchers' database, or he had inside information. He'd turned himself into Mac, for Christsake. Same clothes, same hairstyle, same sword. He knew The Game. Who taught him, Methos? And why?"

"You have a suspicious mind, Joe," Methos said on a sigh.

"Coming from you, buddy, I'll take that as a compliment."

"You also make a few good points. I should have thought of them myself, but I've been a little--distracted."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Methos, how did you know Kuon Lo hadn't killed Mac?"

There it was, the question he'd known would come sooner or later. He'd hoped for later, because he still hadn't worked out a viable answer. He decided to opt for the logical one, which had the added advantage of being partially true. "Kuon Lo didn't have any of MacLeod's memories," he said. "There should have been some residuals. A quickening isn't assimilated that quickly."

Even sedated, Dawson's eyes lit up. "I thought it had to be something like that. So whose memories
Methos stared at him blankly. "What?"

"You heard. Quit stalling, Methos. If you can separate out those two guys' memories from the one quickening, I have to know. It could be the lead I need."

"It's not that simple," he protested. "Fuck it, Joe, I'm not a bloody computer! You don't just hit a key and call up a screen! I'll work on it, just give me a break." He pulled a handful of envelopes out of his pocket and dropped them on Dawson's stomach. They would be a useful, if temporary, diversion tactic. "Etienne sent these for you. Word's got around you're sick and the regulars have been bringing in get-well cards."

"Oh," Dawson said, surprised and pleased. "Thanks."

###

Methos didn't go back to his hotel. Instead he returned to Dawson's apartment, sprawled full length on the couch, and glared at the ceiling. His mind was numb with tiredness, couldn't focus on anything, but neither could he switch off the frenetic whirl of words and images that spun too fast for him to get a grip on them: Dawson's face: the hospital chart: MacLeod's face but oddly out of focus, dark eyes wide in shock, disbelief, pleading--a flare of lightning. Methos swore aloud. He did not need this. If his imagination was going to trot out MacLeod for him, it could at least make it a pleasant fantasy.

He got up and wandered into the kitchen and investigated fridge and freezer. Then he flopped onto the couch again. He was hungry, but too tired to make the effort to stick something in the microwave, or to phone for a delivery. Weariness dragged him down to the strange state that was neither waking nor sleeping, and he went with it willingly. All he needed was twelve hours solid, and then he'd try to sift through the library of his stored memories. It had been a long time since he'd exercised that particular discipline, and there was no guarantee he'd be successful. But the attempt had to be made, if only to keep Dawson's blood pressure down.

"Who taught him?" the Watcher had demanded. "Why?"

'Pourquoi?'' The word echoed in his mind, a desperate plea in a voice he didn't know, and a face--a woman's face--bent over him--

"Shit!" Methos rolled off the couch and staggered to his feet. That didn't come from Kuon Lo. One word, that was all, and without even trying: French, with the subtle accent that said Quebec. He had a hook on the pseudo-MacLeod. "Okay! Enough is enough!" he shouted. "All I need is some sleep, damn it, and I'll get round to you!" He lurched into the kitchen, rooted out the bottle of whiskey and drank half of it. He only just made it back to the couch before the combination of exhaustion and alcohol on an empty stomach dropped him into unconsciousness.

"Pourquoi?" He looked down at the bloody hole in his sweatshirt, then up at the concerned face of the woman leaning over him. The pain hovered at a distance, waiting to swoop in.

Gentle hands stroked through his hair, cupped his cheek. "Hush, my dear. You're safe."

"Mon père?" He struggled to find his English. "Is he dead?" He knew he was, had seen his head--
bile rose in his throat.

"Oh, Robert," she whispered, "I'm so sorry...."

The door-buzzer sounded, startlingly loud in the silence of the apartment, and Methos jerked awake. "Oh, shit," he groaned. He squinted at his watch. He'd had more than his twelve hours, but he needed twelve more, plus a shower and fresh clothes. *Robert. Who the hell was this French-Canadian Robert?*

"Adam?" Etienne called from the landing. "You there? I've got another bundle of mail for Joe."

Methos opened the door, gave the bartender a smile. "Thanks," he said. "Got time for a coffee?"

"Wish I did. We're just starting the lunchtime rush and it's crazy down there at the moment, which is great for business, but not for my stress levels. Give Joe our best wishes when you see him tonight, will you?"

"Of course." He took the collection of envelopes, and Etienne disappeared back down the stairs. Noise swelled briefly as he went through to the bar, became muffled again. Methos closed the door and went to the computer, dropping the mail in a sliding heap on the desk.

Some of the envelopes made a break for freedom and he scooped them up and began to sort through them. Some were obviously business letters, but the rest were personal, with handwritten addresses, and mostly cards by the feel of them. Methos gave these a cursory glance, then froze, tension knotting in his stomach. The writing on one of the envelopes leaped out at him. The smudged postmark was partially readable. The date, La Manche and Normandie were clear enough, though by the state of it, La Poste had chewed it a while before spitting it out.

Methos didn't hesitate. He tore the envelope open and took out the single sheet of paper, checked the signature first.

"Got you!" he muttered. Surtainville wasn't so big he couldn't track down a fellow immortal. When he found Duncan MacLeod, that sorry son of Scotland would regret the day he decided to bugger off on this latest piece of self-indulgent wallowing. And then what? Leave the idiot to his own devices, of course. As long as Methos knew where he was, then all was well.

Except it wasn't. Deep in his cold, still centre, Methos knew he was lying to himself, and the time to accept a few home truths was upon him. Those truths had a lot to do with that warm lodestone lodged safely in his frozen heart, banishing emptiness and steadily melting some of the ice.

So what should he do about it? His first instinct was to find MacLeod, kill him--very slowly--then make sure the man didn't go out of his sight for no more than an hour or so for the rest of his immortal life.

His second instinct was to find MacLeod, kill him--very slowly--then get on with his own interrupted life.

His third instinct was to be on the first plane to anywhere and to hell with Duncan MacLeod, Ignifers and Datorigni.

Smiling grimly, Methos headed for the shower, shedding garments as he went.

An hour later, clean, shaven and wearing clothes from Dawson's wardrobe, Methos sat at the computer and began his search.
Chapter 15

The grate of Presence jerked Methos out of his concentration and he came to his feet in a lithe pounce, sword in his hand. Footsteps ran up the stairs. The door crashed open, and Methos struck the thrusting blade aside.

"Amanda!" he snapped as he backed hastily away. "Don't you know better than to come into a room like that?"

"How the hell was I supposed to know it's you?" she shouted. "Where's Joe? Methos, have you heard?" Tears were wet on her cheeks and her pale face was devoid of make-up. "Duncan--" She broke off with a convulsive sob and dropped her weapon, threw herself into his arms and wept.

"Amanda," he said patiently, holding her close. "While I enjoy having you wrapped around me, you're making my sweater soggy and MacLeod isn't dead."

After a moment she stopped snuffing wetly into his shoulder, and lifted her head. "What?" she said blankly.

"He isn't dead."

The joy that illuminated her face lit a small spark of envy in him. "Are you sure?" she demanded. "You've seen him? Where is he? I'll kill him for this!" She pushed away from him and flounced onto the couch, only to bounce to her feet and stride around the room. "I'll kill him!"

"The queue forms behind me," Methos said, but Amanda wasn't listening.

"How could he do this to me! Damn him!" She started to cry again. "I don't do this!" she wailed. "I don't cry like a-a-"

"Girlie?" Methos suggested.

"Oh, shut up!" Amanda came to him again and put her arms around him. "Just hold me for a moment, will you? There's nothing like thinking someone's dead to realise just how much you love them, is there?" A chill ran down Methos' spine. "Have you got a handkerchief?"

"Yes," he said automatically, and dug one out of his pocket.

"Thanks." She blew her nose with some force, and heaved a shaky sigh. "So what happened? Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"But you've seen him, spoke to him! You said so!"

"No, you weren't listening. I said he wasn't dead."

"Then you can't be sure!"

"I'm sure. Trust me on this."

"Damn it, Methos!" Amanda pulled away from him, started pacing the room once more. "I went to Vienna, tried to find the bastard that did it, but someone had already taken him out--Duncan--oh god, I can't believe it! He was always so--alive!"
"Amanda!" Methos took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Watch my lips. Duncan MacLeod is not dead. I whacked Kuon Lo and he didn't have Mac's quickening." Then cursed. He hadn't meant to say that, but it was too late to call the word back, replace it with 'memories'.

"You can't know that!" she shrieked. "We can't recognise quickenings!"

"I know his," he whispered, and Amanda froze in his loose embrace.

"That's impossible," she said uncertainly. "Isn't it?"

His mouth twisted in a wry smile. "No," he said gently. "It's a long story, but believe me, Kuon Lo didn't kill him."

"Quickenings all feel the same," Amanda said stubbornly, "kind of uncomfortable, jarring and sexy at the same time. What's so different about Duncan's?"

"Not the quickening rush, more his Presence, when we're near. Bordeaux happened, and something changed. You know what happened there?"

"Yeah, he killed some creep called Kronos and another guy, you killed the third one. So what?"

"Silas. His name was Silas," Methos said irritably. "Somehow I got part of Kronos' quickening, and a fragment of MacLeod's came along with it. Since then, it's like we're on the same frequency."

"Ohmygod. So he can recognise you?"

"I doubt it. It wasn't a two-way street."

"Ohmygod," Amanda whispered again, eyes wide. "So what does he feel like?"

Methos shrugged, reluctant to share. "Difficult to describe," he said, "not to say impossible. And before you ask, no, it doesn't tell me where he is, or what he's doing or feeling, or anything else in the super-hero bracket! It's just--there, all the time." His lodestone. "so it stands to reason I'd recognize his quickening if he lost his h— Believe me, Kuon Lo didn’t have it."

"This is getting weird," Amanda said. "Right now, we really miss Darius—if anyone had an answer, he did."

"You're beginning to sound like MacLeod," Methos said acidly. "There are no answers! You'll save yourself a lot of pain and heartache if you bloody-well stop searching for them!"

"So tell him that!"

"I have, more or less."

"I think we should find him. You have been looking, haven't you?"

"No, why should I? He'll surface when he wants to."

"Huh. Okay, I can take a hint. You don't want to talk about him. So let's talk about his quickening. How come it wasn't absorbed along with Kronos and Whatsisname?"

"Silas," he snapped. "I don't know."

"So you and he are in sync now. There has to be something you can do to track him down through the link."
"It isn't a link! The best I can come up with is," he continued, knowing that once Amanda got her teeth into something, she wouldn't let go, "instead of jarring against each other, our quickenings are now on the same harmonic level, what ever that means. But as far as I know, it's only my perception that's changed. If he's noticed anything different, he's never said so."

"How did Kronos do it? Reach out to you from Duncan?"

"I don't know. Hate, rage, revenge, if the emotions are strong enough, who knows what can happen?"

Amanda shivered and pressed closer to him. "Methos, tell me again he's alive."

"He's alive," he said wearily. "Shall I take out an ad? Have it tattooed across my forehead?"

"Don't be snide. Where's Joe? Out looking for him, I bet."

"Joe's in the hospital." And if you say Ohmygod again I'll strangle you.

"Ohmy-- What happened?"

Amanda's frequent interruptions didn't make it a short report, and at the end of it, she leaned back in his arms and stared at him. "So why are you still here?" she asked quietly. "Duncan has to know about this. He'll crucify himself if-if-when Joe dies and he wasn't here. Joe needs him to be here."

"There's some research I'm doing for Joe."

"I'll do it. I'll stay and visit. You go and find Duncan. What am I looking for?"

"Not what, who. The kid who was impersonating MacLeod. He's a French-Canadian called Rob, and so far I haven't found him. I think he's a neo and no one in the Watchers picked up on him."

"Then how have you got that much?" she demanded suspiciously.

"From his memories, filtered through Kuon Lo."

Amanda gaped at him, speechless for all of thirty seconds. "Old man," she said eventually, "you are a barrel of surprises."

"It's no big deal," he said impatiently. "I killed Kuon Lo before he'd had a chance to fully absorb Rob's memories, which made it easier. It's something we can all learn to do, but most of us are so hung up on the quickening rush we don't bother to look any deeper."

"Smartass!" Amanda snorted. "I don't want to go paddling in the memories of some of the bastards I've offed over the years, thank you very much! Besides, it's too much like hard work. Rebecca started to teach me something about it, but I wasn't interested."

"It isn't quite like that," Methos said. "It's more like settling the knowledge into library files, so you can use it if you need to."

"Whatever, I'm still not interested. But you're going to backtrack this Rob." He nodded. "And then you'll look for Duncan?"

"Yes. When I find him--" He offered her a wry smile. "Depending on what I decide to do, there could be some changes made."

"Ah-huh." She studied him with centuries-old eyes, and smiled. "As long as you don't shorten him
by a head, I'll have no quarrel with that."

"You don't know what I might have in mind."

"Don't I?" Her smile became wicked. "I've known you both for a long time, Methos. And Duncan's not exactly a virgin. Ask him about Connor sometime, and Lucas Desiree. Of course he doesn't always see what's right in his face, but I'm sure you'll open his eyes for him."

"If I choose to," he reminded her.

"If you don't, I'll do it for you." Amanda smirked. "I'm not passing this one up."

"There are more important things on the agenda," Methos said, letting her go and standing back. "Right now Rob is top of the list. Will you make sure I don't get interrupted?"

"Of course," she said with grim resolve. "Where? On the couch. Make yourself comfortable and I'll do the rest."

She scribbled a quick 'do not disturb' sign and hung it outside the door, took the phone off its rest and switched off their cell phones.

Methos stretched out on the couch and took several slow, steadying breaths. This wasn't going to be easy. He closed his eyes, aware of Amanda's Presence, aware of her perfume, and found them both disturbing in their different ways. Carefully he shut her out, turned his sight inwards and found his lodestone. It was far more distracting than Amanda.

Duncan MacLeod. When did he discover he couldn't stay away? Methos couldn't at first pin it down, then the memory of their first meeting came into his head, followed swiftly by the first time they'd crossed swords. So very weary of living, but too bloody-minded to let Kalas kill him, the solution had suddenly seemed clear and he'd gone to MacLeod for the coup de grace as if drawn there. He would never have the man in his life, but he could be a part of MacLeod's, and make sure that Kalas was permanently stopped. Physically and mentally exhausted, he'd attacked.

He'd lost the duel, had intended to lose, had taken MacLeod's hand and lifted the katana's blade to his own neck. And waited, head tilted back, eyes almost closed, feeling the chill kiss of the steel on his skin like a benison. It had, he remembered with a self-mocking smile, been close to erotic.

And MacLeod had turned his words back on him, twisted them to something else. "No," the man had said, voice almost a whisper, and the sword was gone from his throat. "Live, Methos, grow stronger. Tomorrow, you'll be glad of another day."

MacLeod was an infant compared to his own years. He had no business being right.

Since then, Methos would be months and miles distant, drifting the warm places of the world, enjoying life. Then an image would come into his head: MacLeod's face, Joe's music, and he would be buying a ticket on the first flight out to Paris or Seacouver almost before he'd made a conscious decision. Going back to the unconditional welcome that lay beneath the snide remarks and the grumbles, knowing in some indefinable way, he was going home.

"--home. You'll be safe there, and we can talk."

"Who the hell are you? Who murdered my father? Why?"

"I'm a friend, Robert. I've known Quinn for years, though I've been abroad for most of the time. He'd written me lots about you and your mom."
"Who was it? Why!"

"Hush. He's run off. Let's get you home and we can talk. This isn't the time or the place."

"I'm not a child, for God's sake! They had swords--"

"Of course they did. Hadn't Quinn been teaching you? Oh, God! He hadn't told you, had he?"

"Told me what?" He was panting as if he'd run a race, and there was a residual pain in his chest. "Who the hell are you?"

"My name's Melissa Stone."

"Melissa Stone," Methos repeated, forcing his eyes open. "Quinn." He curled his hand into the fabric of his shirt, just below his breastbone. "Rob had been shot. The bullet took him in the back and went right through him."

"Someone who went to the Methos Survival Academy," Amanda said, fingers flying over the keyboard. "How does Quinn Chrétien sound to you? Two hundred and twenty-six years old, last marriage was thirty-one years ago to Quebecker Stacie Wilson. They adopted a baby, Robert. Chrétien was beheaded in Montreal two years and a couple of months ago by an unidentified immortal. His Watcher was a Connie Petros. She went on to Watch Julia Hermanez and retired a couple of weeks ago. Robert would have been twenty-five when Quinn died."

"What happened to him?"

"Nothing on here about him or Stacie Chrétien. No pictures of him at all. Am I jumping to conclusions, Methos? Maybe Quinn adopted a kid he knew was going to grow up to be one of us. Quinn is killed, the kid disappears and a couple of years later there's a Duncan-clone with Rob's memories. A clone the Watchers know nothing about. What the hell is going on, and where's the link to Duncan?"

"I don't know." He sat up and rubbed his hands over his face. A splitting headache speared between his eyes and he felt pummeled inside and out. "But we will find it. In the deathless words of Princess Leia, I have a bad feeling about this. Get me coffee, woman, lots of it."

"Huh, what did your last slave die of?" Amanda grumbled. "Get it yourself."

Methos' chuckle wasn't entirely pleasant. "A surfeit of Horsemen," he said, "and she still hates my guts."

"Oh, her." Amanda's sniff was contemptuous. "And you can get your own coffee. The Watchers don't have the only database in town, you know. If there's anything to find on Rob Chrétien, I'll track it down."

###

That evening, they took a taxi to the hospital, Methos laden with a vast bunch of flowers and a basket of assorted fruits Amanda insisted Dawson would be expecting. Methos' snide remark that Dawson would be more likely to shred the offerings looking for his laptop and whiskey, was treated with the contempt she considered it deserved.
Dawson was clearly pleased to see Amanda, though to Methos' critical eye there was the grimness of hidden pain about the man's mouth. "I appreciate this," Dawson said, holding Amanda's hand. "What brought you to Paris? Did you hear about Mac?"

"Yes, but Methos has filled me in. There's something very strange going on, Joe. This look-alike business isn't as simple as it might seem at first glance. We've got some names," Amanda went on. "Melissa Stone, though it probably isn't her real one. Does it mean anything to you?"

"Not a damned thing! C'mon, get on with it!"

"How about Quinn Chrétien? Robert Chrétien?"

"Quinn…. Yeah, that's kind of familiar. He's dead, though. I'm sure of it." His eyes flashed to Methos' face, respect and speculation rife in the steady stare.

"Yes, he is," Amanda said. "He was killed by an unknown, according to his Watcher's report. Robert disappeared after the funeral. But we know that Robert was actually killed as well, and Stone was there when it happened. But there's nothing on Robert’s death or his immortal status, nor her, in Connie's report."

Methos sat back, letting Amanda fill Dawson in on what they had so far. MacLeod's letter was tucked safely away in his pocket. Neither Dawson nor Amanda had seen it, and that was the way it was going to stay for the time being. His failing health was all Dawson needed on his plate right now. That and Melissa Stone. No such name had come up when they'd searched the Watchers' archives. But whoever she was, she'd made enough of an impression for Robert Chrétien to carry her image from Kuon Lo to Methos.

So much so that she seemed familiar to Methos, as if he'd seen her before. He knew he would recognise her the instant he saw her: a tall woman in her late forties, stylish and elegant, with a face more striking than pretty beneath a smooth sweep of brown hair. One other thing was certain; she was mortal. Rob had no memory of Presence from her.

Another migraine-inducing session reading Rob's memories had brought up plenty of information. Over a period of months, Melissa had told him about immortals and the Watchers, all of it the kind of information that an outsider couldn't know. Then she'd told him he was immortal as well, that the man who'd taken Quinn's head had murdered him, but she'd broken her Oath and stepped in to save his head.

"Quinn Chrétien had already done a good job in preparing Rob." Methos took up the story. "He wasn't the brightest spark in the class when it came to intellect, but he'd been a black-belt in Tae Kwon Do and a top-rank member of the National Kendo team. That was all finished, of course. Melissa kept them moving around the African continent and Asia, avoiding Europe and the Americas. Then she began teaching him other stuff. All about The Game, The Prize, and, get this--" He struck a theatrical pose. "--The Never-Ending Fight by a few gifted individuals to prevent that holiest of Grails being claimed by the Unworthy. She told him about Connor MacLeod, who'd killed the Kurgan; about the Sainted Darius, who had been a Beacon Of Light in a Darkening World; about Duncan MacLeod who had killed the Four Horsemen and who had been forced to sacrifice his kinsman to kill the Evil Jacob Kell. Straight out of his favorite comic books. Did I mention the man wasn’t a rocket scientist?"

"Stick to the story," Amanda snapped. "I think it's tragic! Such a waste!"

"You would." he snorted. "It'd be different if the kid looked like Homer Simpson."
"That's not true!" she exclaimed hotly.

"Anyhow," Methos continued, grinning, "according to Melissa, MacLeod had disappeared. He might be dead or trapped, she didn't know for certain, but rumors were beginning to spread and the bad guys were crawling out of the woodwork. It must not be known, she said, that the Prize was so vulnerable.

“This is the humdinger; are you ready for this, Joe? There are so few immortals still living it would not be difficult for another Kronos or Kell to wipe them all out and claim the Prize. So someone had to fill the gap until MacLeod came back to take up his Destined Role once more and protect the two races, mortal and immortal, from the bad guys," He shook his head in disgust. "I may vomit. But Robert swallowed it, hook, line and sinker."

She’d shown Rob a picture of a man who might have been his twin brother. All Rob had to do was borrow the name for a while and she would tell him who had to be taken out of the running. Between them they’d hold the fort for the real MacLeod.

Rob had known he wasn’t smart. He had a talent for the martial arts, but that was all. He’d known he was inarticulate, socially inept. But Melissa was beautiful and clever and cared about him, and she had grown to be his anchor in a world that had become an alien, storm-lashed place.

Reading the memories, Methos had found himself hurting for the man, this flawed clone. It was a handsome face and a splendid body, and Rob had been a genuinely nice kid. But he had gotten by on a sports scholarship, his academic grades glossed over or outright fabricated. That hadn’t changed any since he’d left college. He had a mind younger than his years. 'You poor sod,' Methos thought. 'The perfect dupe. But why?'

"So who the hell is this bitch?" Amanda demanded. "What is she trying to do, spinning those fairy-tales? Filling that poor kid's head with glory and honor and getting him killed!"

"Maybe she didn't intend him to die," Dawson said thoughtfully. "Think about it. No one knows where Mac is. Supposing he is still alive, what would he do if he heard someone on the circuit used his name? Investigate, right?"

"It's a bit thin, Joe," Methos said doubtfully. "But it's the best we've got so far. The next question is, of course, where is she now, and what's she going to do without her stooge?"

"Find another way to flush Duncan out," Amanda said. "It's as plain as Methos' nose, for God's sake!"

Methos sighed, but let the insult ride for the time being. "Then the next obvious bait could well be you, Joe."

"She could be watching the hospital right now!" Amanda exclaimed. "Methos, you have got to finish that composite when we get back to Joe's. I want to know what she looks like, and Joe needs to see it in case he can recognise her."

"We're assuming, then, she has a grudge against MacLeod, and doesn't just want to find him so she can give him an early birthday present?" Methos drawled. But he might as well have saved his breath.

"If she is casing this place," Joe said, "then she--shit!" He broke off and tried to sit up. "Fuck it! Methos, remember the Phantom Hacker? What’s the betting it was her! She knows who you guys are, and she's gonna know you're involved with Mac. You've got to find him and warn him, but for
God's sake don't lead her to him!"

"Stop worrying." Amanda's smile was predatory. "We can take care of ourselves and him. Damn it, Joe, between us we've got more than six thousand years! You think some crazy bitch is going to manage what no immortal has done in all that time?"

"Do you want me to answer that?" Methos said mildly. "As in bang, you're dead? And, oh, is this a sword I have in my hand? No one has mentioned Horton in all of this. I've searched what cross-references I can and nothing's come up, but that doesn't mean to say she hasn't got a link to him or his successors." He stood, gave Dawson a rueful smile. The Watcher was looking exhausted, though his eyes were alert enough. "Take it easy, Joe, and don't be in a hurry to get out of here. I'll do my best to track him down, and I'll keep in touch."

"Methos, Amanda, when you find Mac," Dawson said, "don't tell him where I am or anything about this." He gestured towards the esoteric gadgetry he was plugged into. "He might decide to come back, and if she does want to take him out--"

"Hey, it's only Methos who'll be disappearing," Amanda interrupted, "and if I pick her out of the crowd, she's mine, understood?"

"Not if I see her first," Methos said coldly.

Amanda pulled a face at him, and then leaned down to kiss Dawson on the mouth. Then kissed him again, slowly and thoroughly. "Be good," she said, smiling. "I'll be back tomorrow."

###

The next morning Methos checked out of the hotel, headed straight to the airport and got a one-way ticket to Singapore, that being the first available flight out. By midday, he was high in the stratosphere and Paris was a cold, wet nightmare behind him. There was no way he would risk leading any possible shadow to Surtainville.
"What the hell is going on here?" Evans protested. "Go ahead, search me! Who do you think I am, James Bloody-Bond?" He needed inspiration, a get-out clause, a feasible excuse--and found it in a calendar pinned above the workbench. No naked women, but a pile of very large, muddy men in front of a set of H-shaped goal posts. When the chips are down, go with as much of the truth as you can get away with. "I'm a rugby scout," he said.

All that got him was a chorus of raucous disbelief.

"Are you sure you want to go down that road?" MacLeod asked, all anger replaced by glittering amusement.

"For God's sake, why would I lie?" he snorted. With difficulty, he dragged his eyes away from the immortal, and locked gazes with Gervais Dubosc. "I'm with the Wrexham Dragons Rugby Club. We're on a tour of Normandy at the moment; we've played St. Malo, Avranches, Granville, Barneville-Carteret, and Les Pieux. We're playing Cherbourg tomorrow, then Bricquebec, St. Sauvuer, La Haye, Coutances--"

"So why are you hanging around my boatyard, following my men?"

"Because I'm trying to make contact with other local teams. We want to set up another tour for next year, invite more Normandy teams over to Wales."

"He could have seen us practicing on the beach," Matthieu said.

Evans snatched the gift as if it was a ball out of the ruck, and ran with it. "I saw some men throwing a ball around and some of them had a logo on their jackets, but I hadn't a clue who they were or where they were based. Then I saw the logo on your jacket, and took a chance. You obviously play rugby. Can you tell me where your local team is based and how do I get in touch with the captain, or manager?"

"What position do you play?" It was a harsh demand from the oldest of the group, and Evans didn't hesitate.

"Loosehead prop," he said, "and I double as assistant physio."

They stared at him, suspicious still, but mellowing. Then MacLeod took a halting step forward. "Boss," he said, "do you want me to take him outside while you talk about it?"

"Good idea. Stick him in the office, and don't let him go."

MacLeod gave Evans a toothy grin and fastened a borderline painful grip on his elbow. "Let's take a walk, M'sieur Evans," he said. "I might even make you a coffee."

"Don't put yourself out on my account," Evans snapped, twisting his arm free as they started across the windswept yard. Dusk was coming down fast beyond the powerful lights that illuminated the yard, and the temperature was dropping. MacLeod was still limping, Evans noticed, and he had to bite back the questions.

"I won't, don't fret," MacLeod said, reverting to English. "You picked the wrong time to come snooping around, Evans, and I hope for your sake you can back up the rugby claim."
"Of course I can, and I wasn't snooping. I told you, I'm--"

"A Watcher." Evans's stride faltered for an instant. "Why did Joe send you? I'd hoped he'd come himself. Unless I'm right out in the cold this time."

"Dawson knows you're here?"

"Yes, I wrote to him. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"No. I saw you as the coach came through Surtainville." Abruptly, he shut up, aware that he was talking too much.

"Pure blind chance?" MacLeod sighed. Evans nodded, taking a quick glance at the man's profile. "Damn." A hint of sadness showed in the self-mocking set of his mouth. "Go on in and sit down, I'll put the kettle on."

Evans led the way into the office and MacLeod shut the door behind them. "So how is Joe keeping?" MacLeod asked as he filled up a large electric kettle and plugged it in, then reached for an industrial-sized cafetière. The man was relaxed, friendly, and it would be too easy to respond in kind.

"I don't know," Evans said reluctantly. "Haven't met him. I've never been a field agent, I'm in Research"

"But you know of him."

"Who doesn't?" Evans shrugged. "Bit of a maverick, that one."

MacLeod snorted with laughter. "That's Joe," he said, a wealth of affection in his voice that startled Evans.

"They took him out of the field," he said, and could have bitten his tongue off at the root.

"What?" Perplexed, MacLeod met his eyes. "Why would they do a dumb thing like that? Joe's damn good at what he does."

"Yes, well, that wasn't the point, was it?" Once committed, Evans felt himself honor-bound to answer the question. "It was the murder, see. At least, some claimed it was murder."

There was a very real horror on MacLeod's face now. "What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded huskily. "Joe wouldn't--"

"There was a Watcher with a rifle, aiming to blow your head off or put you back into Sanctuary. Dawson shot him. So they shoved him sideways into Research."

"God, I didn't know! Poor Joe."

"What about the poor bugger he killed?" Evans said acidly. "Not that the idea of the Sanctuary didn't turn my stomach when I heard about it--" He cut the words off again. "This is ridiculous. I can't talk to you, MacLeod. I swore an Oath."

"Fair enough." MacLeod turned his back, lined up mugs and poured the now-boiling water over the grounds in the cafetière. The aroma of coffee filled the office. "You can listen. If you're not on an assignment, get out of the area. There are local issues here that you don't want to be mixed up in and it could become dangerous."
"Are you threatening me?" Evans demanded, a belligerent jut to his chin.

"I am not!" MacLeod barked, spinning to face him. The immortal moved as fast as a striking snake and Evans had to steel himself not to step back. "You'd damn-well know it if I was! Please yourself! Just don't expect me to haul your ass out of the shit when you're sinking in it!"

"Listen, boyo," Evans snarled, "I don't expect anything from you but a load of bollocks. I don't like your kind or what you do to each other! And when you drag humans into it--"

"Humans! You bastard! If you feel like that about us, why be a Watcher--unless you're one of Horton's disciples!"

Evans knew he'd said words that should never have been spoken. Unfair, untrue words that had struck home under the immortal's guard, and he'd seen the swift-hidden pain beneath MacLeod's anger. "I am not!" Then: "Sorry," he muttered awkwardly. But MacLeod had turned away and didn’t respond.

Over MacLeod's shoulder, Evans saw Dubosc and his workmen approaching, and he waited with carefully hidden trepidation for the verdict.

Dubosc came into the office, the others crowding behind him, and he gave Evans a smile. "I made a phonecall," he said, "to a friend in Granville. He vouched for your team. He also vouched for you personally. You scored a touchdown that cost them the match. Sorry about the misunderstanding, but we've got some valuable craft and equipment in the yard, and we can't afford to take chances." He held out his hand. "No hard feelings?"

"None at all," Evans smiled, shaking hands. "Especially if I can arrange a match."

"See Yves, he'll sort something out. In the meantime, you're welcome to stick around. We're playing Sciotot at the weekend, if you're interested."

"I'm interested," Evans said, grinning.

"Won't your team-mates miss you?" MacLeod asked mildly, handing round mugs of steaming coffee.

"No," Evans answered. "I'm out of the game for a while in any case. Pulled thigh muscle, twisted knee."

"That's a shame," Dubosc said. "I was going to say you could join in our training sessions if you wanted."

"Shame," agreed MacLeod in a whisper only Evans could hear. The wry amusement was back in the man's eyes, and Evans had to set his mouth to stop the answering smile. No. He did not like this man. He would not like this man. MacLeod was an immortal, a stone-cold killer of his own kind, and anyone else who got in his way. So is Amanda Darieux, said a small voice in the back of his mind, I wouldn't have said those words to Amanda.

That evening, looking back on the episode from the security of his hotel room, Evans wasn’t particularly proud of himself.

###
The next day at the boatyard, the Welshman and his rugby proposition were still being talked about with some enthusiasm. MacLeod said nothing, just got on with his work.

The discussion carried on into the mid-morning coffee break, until Jean-Michel broke an uncharacteristic silence.

"Rugby matches are all very well," he said, "but the coincidences are piling up. I'm finding it odd that Rees Evans shows up soon after Anders started to get rough. Okay, he's who he says he is, and he plays rugby, but maybe he's a lot more than that? Like on Carston's payroll."

"Jean-Michel has a point." Thierry nodded. "I think we should have Evans back in here to answer a few more questions."

"Oh, I don't know," MacLeod said easily. "Personally, I think he's harmless."

"I'm not so sure," Gervais said with a frown. "Maybe we were too quick to take him on face-value. Talk to him, Sensei; see if you can find out anything more about the man. Like where he's been visiting since November."

"Okay, boss."

###

After the fiasco at the boatyard the previous day, the last man Evans expected to see at his hotel room door was the immortal.

"We need to talk," MacLeod said quietly. It was a statement of fact, no threat or coercion implied, but the sheer presence of the man was borderline impressive even without the usual immortal weaponry. He wore the Dubosc jacket, a garment that might hide a carving knife, but never a sword.

"I'm not talking to you," he said and shut the door. Or started to. MacLeod put his shoulder against it, leaned a little, and Evans had a choice. He could either exert his considerable strength and do his damnedest to dump MacLeod on his arse, or he could give in to his curiosity and hear what the man had to say. MacLeod leaned a little harder and the door didn’t budge an inch. Evans knew he was almost certainly physically the stronger, but when it came to skill, he was a non-starter. While a confrontation would gain him a prideful satisfaction along with the bruises, he’d learn nothing. "I'll listen," he said. He jerked the door open, hoping in vain to catch MacLeod off-balance. "You have five minutes."

"Fair enough." MacLeod entered the room with the wary prowl that made Evans feel clumsy by comparison. No sign of that limp now. "Don't take this as a threat, none is intended. Leave the area as soon as you can. The local trouble could well get rougher in the next few weeks and if you're still hanging around me you might get swept up in it. Warn Joe to stay away as well. I'll be in touch with him as soon as it's safe." He turned for the door.

"That's it?" Evans demanded.

"Yes. Goodbye, Evans."
"What kind of trouble?" The words were out before he thought to catch them back, and he cursed himself. That had always been his problem, too impetuous.

MacLeod paused, slanting an unreadable glance over his shoulder. "The boss had a run in with a smuggler and won. Now the main suspect has possibly regrouped and is starting to flex his muscles again."

"So why are you buying in? What difference does it make to you, for God's sake?"

"I owe him and he's my employer," MacLeod snapped. "More than that, he's a friend. Need anything else for the chronicle?"

"Yes. Why are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Let's see, what's the favorite phrase out of the UN? To minimize collateral damage."

"Okay, boyo, I'll accept that. But I'm a Watcher and I swore an Oath. I'm staying put. Who's the villain of the piece?"

"A Jack Carston, based in St. Helier."


"Didn't think you would have," MacLeod said. "Evans, why did you become a Watcher?"

"None of your business."

"Wrong. You stay, you become my business. Do you hate all our guts or is it just me?"

"I don't like what you do--all of you--it's such a waste of life, of knowledge, of experience--and why?" The question had burned in him ever since he'd first become forcibly aware of immortals, but he'd never before had the chance to demand an answer from one of the protagonists. "What is the point of this bloody Game?"

"Do you think I haven't spent the last four hundred plus years asking that?" MacLeod's voice stayed level, little more than a whisper, but the intensity in him raised the hair on the back of Evans' neck and put a shiver down his spine. "The wisest, gentlest man I've ever known couldn't find answers, and if Darius couldn't, no one can. Darius. You know about him? The immortal a Watcher murdered?" Unable to speak, Evans nodded. "Why did you become a Watcher?"

"My aunt married this man," Evans muttered. "They didn't have any kids. My mother died when I was young, my father was sick in hospital a lot, so I spent most of my time with them. He took a deep breath. "To cut a long story short, he was challenged and lost his head. I saw the whole thing: the challenge, duel and quickening. The other guy's Watcher recruited me. That was six years ago."

"Evans, we don't choose to be what we are," MacLeod said, voice devoid of expression. Evans was glad of that, because any hint of sympathy would trigger the simmering anger rising against the walls of his self-control. But underneath the anger was the sharp blade of grief, and for a moment it was as if a comrade's arm had dropped across his shoulders, supporting, offering--Evans pushed away the grief, burying it again beneath his resentment.

"You are vampires," he said coldly. "Yes, I accept that some of you try to live normal lives, and do your damndest to keep us mortals out of danger. But that doesn't change the one simple fact. Every one of you is a parasite, and you kill your own kind so you can feed off their life-energy. Do
you deny that?"

"No."

A single word, flat and emotionless, nor could Evans read anything into the man's expression, though he avoided meeting those dark eyes. "Goodbye, MacLeod," he said.

The immortal didn't answer, just walked out of the door, shutting it quietly behind him.

Evans sank into the nearest chair, rubbing shaking hands over his face and swearing under his breath.

Immortals. Bloody immortals! Old pain speared through the anger, bringing with it memories he would just as soon keep buried.

It had started off as a pretty good day; prime seats at Twickenham Stadium just one row up from the touchline to watch Wales defeat England in that round of the Six Nations Tournament. They had yelled themselves hoarse, and the Welsh team had done the job, winning against the odds 16 points to 12. Then they'd gone for a meal in a classy restaurant.

As a twentieth birthday present, it took some beating, and Rees was euphoric as they started the long drive through the night back to Wrexham.

"Uncle Alun," he said, "thanks. It's been fantastic."

Alun Jones grinned across at him. "Glad you enjoyed it, kid. Mind you, winning like that has to be the icing on the cake." Jones was somewhere in his forties, dark-haired and blue-eyed, with a smile that came readily and lit dour features to an unexpected handsomeness. Threads of grey were appearing in the untidy hair, but for as long as Rees could remember, Alun Jones was unchanged. Not like Rees' father, a man of about the same age and weighed down by illness, old and frail before his time.

For Rees, Jones was a surrogate father as well as a much-loved uncle, taking the role and duties that Gareth Evans was too sick to carry out. Jones and Megan, Gareth's older sister, had no children of their own, and Rees had filled a gap in their lives that he was only beginning to understand as he grew to adulthood.

"Get some sleep, if you can," Jones said, "I'll drive the first four hours, you can take over the rest of the way home."

Rees settled back in the passenger seat and closed his eyes. He didn't think he'd do more than doze, but when a sibilant curse from Jones woke him, they were miles and hours from London.

"What?" Rees said blearily.

"Nothing," Jones said. But his voice was grim. "Go back to sleep, kid."

Rees squinted at the luminous face of his watch. "It's been four hours, do you want me to take over now?"

"No, I'm okay." His eyes kept flicking to the rear-view mirror, and finally Rees took a look behind them. A car was tucked in behind them, not close enough for the headlights to dazzle in the mirror, but close enough.

"Is he following us?" Rees asked, sitting up. "Is anything wrong?"
"Nothing for you to worry about. There's a service station up ahead, we'll stop off and get some coffee."

"Fine by me." But Rees kept on glancing behind him.

The car stayed with them for the next half a dozen miles. It followed them into the services parking lot, and pulled into a space a couple of cars away. It was a dark blue BMW, and its sleek lines made their old Discovery look like a tank.

"Rees," Jones said quietly, "go in and get us a couple of coffees, and anything else you fancy."

"You're not coming in?"

"Not yet."

Reluctantly, Rees got out of the car and headed for the entrance to the services block. Something was wrong, he knew, and it set a nervous churning in his gut. Once inside, he stopped and looked back. The driver of the BMW had gotten out of his car and was approaching the Discovery. Jones emerged, wearing the old raincoat that lived in the back of the car, its long folds wrapped around him.

The two men talked, Jones shaking his head vehemently, and Rees would have given his right arm to know what they were saying. Finally, his uncle nodded, and the stranger returned to his BMW, but didn't drive off. Jones climbed back into his car and sat hunched up behind the wheel.

Rees bought takeout coffees and a couple of chocolate bars, and hurried back to the parking lot.

"Uncle," he said as he handed over a coffee, "who is that man?"

Jones didn't answer for a moment. His profile looked grey and tired, oddly defeated.

"Someone I have to meet," he said quietly. "But not yet." And would say no more.

They drove in silence out of the services, and it was an hour or so before Rees realized the BMW was still with them. It was well back, but undoubtedly following. He started to say something but stopped.

###

The BMW stayed behind them all the way, through Wrexham and onto the Llanfynydd road. It was still there when Jones turned into the lane that led to the farm. He pulled in at the first field gate.

"Rees," Jones said. "Take the car and go on up. Tell your aunt I'm just checking the ewes. There are foxes about. This won't take long."

"Uncle Alun--"

"Go on home." And he climbed out, slammed the door behind him.

Rees slid across into the driver's seat and looked into the rear view mirror. The BMW was stationary, lights off, at the end of the lane, half-hidden by the wall.
"Go on!" Jones shouted, urging him away with a fierce sweep of his arm, and Rees obeyed.

He didn't drive far. Just up the lane, past the junction with the old track and over the first rise. Then he braked to a halt, got out and sprinted down the lane as quietly as he could. Luckily the moonlight was enough for him to judge his footing.

It was as well he'd tried for silence. He caught sight of the two men just as they turned off the lane, and he stopped, crouching behind the stone-built field wall, while Jones and the stranger walked away up the track, side by side. Ahead of them was a band of wind-twisted trees, and as soon as they were out of sight, Rees ran after them.

On the far edge of the trees a wide gate stood ajar. A broad hay meadow opened out beyond it, fenced with barbed wire, and Rees didn't risk leaving the shadow-cover. His uncle and the stranger were facing each other in the middle of the field, black silhouettes in the moonlight, their breath misting pale about their heads in the cold air. Then, to Rees' stunned amazement, they both drew swords from their coats and gave a semi-formal salute. The blades clashed together with an unexpected discordance, and the duel was on. Rees didn't doubt that this was for real and to the death.

The shock of it held him paralyzed until Jones was wounded. It was a cut to the thigh and he almost went down. He recovered himself with an eel-twist and parry. Rees took a long step forward, drawing in breath to yell with all the power of his lungs. A crushing weight hit him from behind, drove him to the ground, and a hand clamped over his nose and mouth.

"Ssh!" hissed a voice in his ear. "Be quiet! We can't stop this."

Rees was strong. He'd played rugby for seven years now and was close to his adult weight and strength. But the man had an arm-lock on him that he couldn't break. Half suffocated, he was dragged back into the trees and another pair of hands grabbed him.

"Rees," the first man whispered, and the shock of his name was an added jolt. "I'm going to let you go, but the first sound you make, I'll drop you, understand? I'll explain later."

"We should get him out of here," the second man muttered.

"Too late for that. You watch your man, I'll watch mine. Remember, Rees, not a sound. If Alun hears you, it could distract him enough to cost him the fight."

That alone was enough to freeze Rees where he lay, and he watched with terrified fascination as the duel played itself out across the frosted grass. Soon it became clear to him that Alun Jones was out-matched. The urge to throw himself between the blades--to do something--anything--that would stop the insanity, was too much. But the hand smothered over his mouth and nose again, choking off the yell building in his chest. At the same time, his uncle folded over a slashing cut to his belly, dropping his sword. The other blade swung up and down, and Alun Jones' head reeled from his shoulders to bounce incongruously on the grass. His body fell forward, and the victor stepped back, wiping his sword blade on his sleeve.

"Get him out of here!" The second man whispered again. "I'll call in the clean-up squad."

"No, I'll do it. I'll take care of Rees as well. Come on, lad, we need to be out of here." He pulled the young man to his feet, pushed him toward the track.

"No!" Rees gasped, "Uncle Alun--"

"There's nothing you can do for him but be safe. Come on." The two men grabbed an arm each and
started to drag Rees away. He resisted them as best he could, craning his head back over his
shoulder for a last glimpse of his uncle--and saw a dense white mist spiraling from the body, a mist
that flickered with small lightnings. It gathered itself, then struck at the victor, spearing into his
body time after time. Lightning ran along the barbed wire fencing, leapt from gate hinges to latch, a
coruscating fire that dazzled through his tears and hurt his eyes.

Rees had no chance to see more. He was hustled out of the tree-belt and along the track to the lane,
then he was pulled into the cover of a hawthorn bush and pressed against the harsh slabs of stone
that was the field wall.

"He knows I was with Uncle Alun," Rees said suddenly.

"He saw you drive off," the second man said with conviction. "He won't look for you. That isn't
Tasker's way."

"I'll be looking for him!" Rees vowed. "I'll kill the bastard!"

"You can't," the first man said gently. "He's immortal."

"Harry." A word of warning from the man's companion.

"No, John, Rees needs to know, and have the chance to join us if he wants. It's how most of us,
including you and me, came into the Society, wasn't it? Why should it be different for him?"

"Point taken. I'm off to my car, or I'll lose him. You sure you don't want a clean-up crew?"

"I'm sure. I can make it look like an accident. God knows I've had enough practice," Harry said
wearily. John nodded, gave his arm a quick squeeze and gave Rees a pat on the shoulder. "Take
care," he said, and disappeared into the night.

Then Rees and Harry watched in silence as Tasker walked slowly down the lane, carrying two
swords, went to his own car and drove off.

"Oh, God," Rees whispered, voice breaking on grief, "Uncle.... No! I don't believe this! It's a trick!
Let go of me! I'll call the cops--"

"No," Harry said, voice compassionate. "Because Alun Jones was one hundred and eighty-seven
years old, and the only way to kill him was by taking his head."

"That's--crazy--" Rees croaked.

"Yes, I know." Harry's smile was bitter. "Your uncle was one of the better ones, and I've watched
him for over twenty years. A quiet man trying to live a normal life.... It grieves me to see him
gone."

Rees didn't answer, couldn't. Tears burned in his eyes, choked his throat, and all he could think of
was the way his uncle's head had--bounced--the lightning storm--and how the hell was he going to
tell Aunt Megan--"Why didn't you stop them?" he shouted. "What are you? MI5 or something?
You should have stopped them! Or let me do it!"

"It doesn't work that way. I'm sorry, son, I truly am. No, I'm not MI-anything. I belong to a society
called the Watchers, and that's what we do. Watch immortals, record their lives, and they don't
know the first thing about us. Well, most of 'em don't," he added with a growl to his voice.

"Immortals?"
"I'll tell you about them later. Right now I need to set the scene, so I want you to give me the keys to your car, then to go and sit in mine until it's done. Then we'll call an ambulance. Your uncle fell asleep at the wheel and you were thrown clear when the car hit the wall. It caught fire and you couldn't get Alun out."

This wasn't real. None of it was real. "No," Rees said, feeling a deathly chill settle in his stomach. "I'll help you."

He'd helped, up to a point. Moving like a robot, he'd fetched the Discovery, drove it into the hayfield, but couldn't watch while Harry had lifted the heavy corpse and its separate head into the back. He'd driven back down to the road, and waited while Harry had strapped his uncle into the driver's seat. There hadn't been much blood; it wasn't like a body at all, just a stage-prop.

Finally Harry had turned to him with a real regret in his eyes. In short sentences, he had talked more about immortals, about the Game and the Prize, and about the Society of Watchers. Then he had paused. "I'll be in touch," he'd said, "but now we have to make this look good. I'm sorry, Rees. Alun was a decent man." And he had swung a sudden fist to Evans' jaw that sent him flying half-stunned into the briar-filled ditch.

Moments later the Discovery had roared into life, and hurtled forward, engine racing. It hit the field wall at an angle with a sickening crunch of metal and glass and overturned, then it had erupted into flames. That was the last thing Evans had seen until he'd woken up in the hospital.

For months he'd convinced himself of the reality of the crash, that his uncle's body had been thrown forward and decapitated by the crumpling roof as the car rolled. That the sword fight had been nothing but a product of his concussed brain. Until the Watchers had contacted him.

Grimly Evans shoved the memories back where they belonged. MacLeod was right. Immortals didn't choose to be what they were; they just had to live with the consequences. So did their surrogate families, and the Watchers who haunted their every move.

After a while, Evans turned on his laptop, called up Dawson's contact page and took the man's phone number. For another hour he thought it through yet again before keying in the numbers. Then, anti-climax that it was, all he got was a voice-mail.

"Rees Evans, North Wales Research," he said. "Mr. Dawson, I'm in Surtainville and I've made contact with MacLeod. He's heading for a possible confrontation with Jack Carston aka John Trecarrick and I need your advice." He hesitated for a moment. "I haven't made the sighting official yet. Please call me back." He reeled off his cell phone number and ended the call, aware that he should have done this at his first glimpse of Duncan MacLeod.

###

Adam had disappeared. Irritated, Melissa wished she could give the man a piece of her mind. Apart from the inconvenience to herself, he should have more consideration for the sick man in the Bichat Hospital. And he was very sick. She'd hacked into the hospital's records, found Joseph's and gone straight to his case notes. They'd made grim reading, even though she'd found half the medical jargon incomprehensible. Time was not on her side.

At least Amanda was still around, staying in Joseph's apartment above the bar, visiting him daily
with flowers and fruit. A fickle, thieving whore she might be, but she cared enough to stay, which was more than Adam had done.

Slowly a plan began to form in Melissa's mind. It was risky, but it could well work on more than one front. If she was to take Amanda down, not kill her--well, not permanently, it might send the immortal running straight to Adam's arms. Or have her summon him back to her side. Whichever way, she, Melissa, would gain by it.

So Melissa took the flat case containing the high-powered sniper's rifle she'd bought when she'd first returned to Paris, and went to the small apartment block opposite the bar. It was a somewhat rundown building, with no security, electronic or human. No one appeared to challenge her, and she made her way to the top floor without hindrance. There were four doors opening off the dingy corridor, and she listened at each one, hearing nothing.

Sometimes, you just had to take a chance.

Heart beating just a little faster, Melissa pushed open the window at the top of the stairs. She had a clear view across the street and into Joseph's living room. A large spray of flowers wrapped in bright paper lay on the table, and yet another basket of assorted fruit. Amanda appeared every now and then, wrapped in a bathrobe. Would a single shot be enough to do the trick, or should she underline the threat, make it more personal? Making her decision, Melissa opened the case, snapped the stock and barrel together, fitted the scope-sight, settled the weapon to her shoulder and waited.

And waited. Finally Amanda appeared again, this time wearing an ice-blue suit that hadn't been bought from a chainstore, if Melissa was any judge. Amanda picked up the flowers and Melissa squeezed the trigger.

A small starred hole appeared in Joseph's window and Amanda fell. Melissa jerked her window down, broke the gun and stowed it in its case, and hurried down the stairs. She didn't know for certain how long she would have, scant minutes probably. She entered the bar through the back door and went up the stairs as silently as she could, rushed into the apartment and located the kitchen with one sweeping glance. She grabbed up the bread knife and threw herself at the body on the floor just as Amanda drew in that first convulsive breath of life, and thrust the serrated blade under the immortal's sternum.

It wasn't easy. Fabric and flesh seemed to cling to the knife and Amanda convulsed. Using her weight more than strength, Melissa pushed the weapon deeper, angling it to find the heart, and there was no more movement. Amanda was just a body again, without breath, without life, and she would stay that way until Melissa pulled out the blade.

Shakily Melissa got to her feet. This was the second time she'd killed, but she'd used a gun on Robert, giving him his first death from a distance, not knowing whether or not he would come back from it. This was different. There was blood on her hands, and on her coat, but it didn't show against the dark wool.

Blood on her hands.

Immortal blood, so it didn't count.

Melissa went back to the kitchen and washed her hands thoroughly, making sure her fingernails were clean. Then she tidied her hair and began a careful search of the apartment. She hadn't gone any further than the desk drawers when the phone rang.
Her heart lurched to her throat, and Melissa couldn’t move. The sound was impossibly loud in the apartment. Loud enough to wake Amanda? Trembling now, she waited for the caller to get fed up and end it, but instead the voice-mail clicked on.

"I can't take your call right now," said Joseph's rich, smoky voice, "leave your name and number and I'll get back to you when I can."

The caller left more than that. Melissa listened to the message, and her heart swelled as if it would burst. She smiled. It became a chuckle, then laughter, light and joyous. "Thank you, Rees Evans," she said, and leaned over Amanda's body to press the delete button. There was nothing like being in the right place at the right time, and no one would know that call had been made unless it suited her. It certainly didn't suit her to have Amanda and Joseph know that Duncan was still alive. Not yet. Now she could begin to set up the endgame. For that she needed Joseph out of the hospital and mobile, and preferably Adam back in Paris. Well, Amanda should prove useful there.

With a last glance around the apartment, Melissa left. Amanda still lay on the floor like a broken doll, a scatter of flowers about her, the handle of the bread knife jutting from her chest. She could stay like that, Melissa decided, and let her Watcher grow curious. She pictured his dilemma; should he take out the knife and get out fast before Amanda came back, or leave her for a mortal to find, with all the attendant chaos that would cause. Melissa began to laugh again. She was still laughing quietly as she crept down the stairs and out of the back door.
Chapter 17

Methos wasn’t inclined to take chances, so he bought flight tickets he didn't intend to use and hopped from route to route on a random basis. It took him a week of zigzagging around the planet on a variety of planes, but by the time he eventually ended up back in France via a flight into Guernsey and a ferry to St. Malo, Methos was 100% certain he hadn’t been followed.

He hired a car and soon after dawn he was heading up the coast towards Surtainville. The non-stop travelling had left him physically exhausted, but not mentally. He was able to give the problem of locating a straying MacLeod most of his attention.

Once he'd located MacLeod, Methos wasn’t so sure about his next move. Yes, he’d pass on the warning about Melissa Stone, but there was another issue to be dealt with. Methos had no doubts about his own feelings for the man. The mountain had fallen on him at their first meeting, and though he’d tried at first to convince himself it was nothing more than a physical attraction he could switch off any time he wanted, he'd long since admitted the depth of his commitment.

Of MacLeod's feelings on the matter, he had no idea. He was aware that the man considered him a friend, probably a close friend, and other than that brief nightmare when Kronos had surfaced MacLeod always seemed glad to see him whenever he showed up. But that was a far cry from becoming his lover. Amanda's not so subtle hint about Connor MacLeod and Lucas Desiree wasn’t a big surprise. Although there was nothing explicit in MacLeod's chronicles to suggest he'd had a sexual relationship with another man, it was a rare immortal that didn't explore varied aspects of their sexuality. And MacLeod had a deep vein of sensuality running through him.

Well, so did he, but he managed to keep it well-hidden most of the time. When he didn't, Methos reflected wryly, he usually ended up in very hot water. This could well be no exception to that rule, but he was prepared to risk it. No more running, no more playing with fire, it was time to go with the first instinct that had hit as he'd read the letter to Joe. He might even skip the part about killing him slowly. Maybe.

"Ready or not, MacLeod," he said aloud as he turned off the D904, "you are mine."

###

Surtainville was a small town with a neat little harbor and a marina, Methos discovered. The buildings ranged in date from the medieval to modern in a pleasantly haphazard way, mixing warm ochre stone with half-timbered brick and plaster. Many of the narrow side streets and alleys still retained their medieval cobblestones, and ancient archways led off to small courtyards. There were some classy restaurants, some up-market hotels and the usual mix of shops and stores. These included antique shops, a couple of which specialized in old books, to his great interest, but in none of them did he get that sense of MacLeod's Presence. Nor had he expected to. Anyone knowing a little about the man would make antique shops their first priority, so MacLeod would almost certainly be steering clear of them.

Methos knew him better than most, so after a brief self-indulgent exploration of the town, he went straight to the seafront. After all, someone who had lived for years on a river barge, by choice, had to have a fondness for boats.
La Maison Verte was a small hotel that overlooked the harbor and the marina as well as a good part of the beach. Methos booked into a room with a view of them all and settled at his balcony window with his field glasses. If MacLeod was down there with the boats as Methos suspected, sooner or later he'd see him, while he would be safely out of Presence-range.

For an hour or so Methos scanned the area without result. Darkness was closing in and streetlights began to glow, but he wasn't discouraged. Come the evening he'd take a leisurely hunt through the restaurants and wine-bars. He was in no real hurry. The last time he'd checked with Amanda, Dawson was doing fine, was out of the ICU and in a room off the main ward.

Someone, almost certainly Melissa Stone, had made their presence known though; a single shot through the living room window from across the street and Amanda was down. Needless to say, Amanda had said nothing about it to Dawson, but she was strident on Methos' lack of success in tracing MacLeod and had no doubt about who had pulled the trigger.

"Needles and haystacks, Amanda," he'd said, and held the cell phone away from his ear as she replied at full volume. "Don't worry, I'll find him before Joe gets out of the hospital. Don't walk in front of any more windows, and don't talk to strangers."

"Hah! You are such a smart-ass! She drilled me, Methos!" Amanda had been furious. "You know what the bitch did then? She calmly sauntered in and stuck Joe's bread knife in my heart, and left the damn thing! If Hal hadn't come in looking for me, I'd still be there!"

"Who's Hal?"

"My Watcher. We have an Arrangement. He's kind of sweet, with these twin daughters. They're only two, and the cutest--"

"Amanda!"

"Okay! Hal didn't hear the shot. Just suddenly noticed a hole in Joe's window that wasn't there the last time he looked, and came to investigate. He pulled the knife out and I revived. But I was out of it for at least half an hour. She's playing mind games with us, Methos."

"She could also have searched Joe's place," Methos had said. "There's no telling what she could have found." At least she couldn't have gotten to the hidden chronicles. They weren't in the apartment.

"Oh, thanks. That makes me feel so much better!"

"Glad about that. Stay put, 'Manda. If she thinks we know MacLeod's still alive, she might be trying to drive you right to him."

"Hah! If I knew where he was, I still wouldn't do that to him!"

"Let's face it, you have before in the not so distant past. You've used MacLeod as bodyguard and trouble-shooter to get unpleasant bad guys off your back." Chronicled events, as well, by both her Watchers of the time and latterly Joe Dawson. Which meant that Melissa Stone would know there was a predictable pattern for her to use. Or she might have shot Amanda to draw him back to Paris. But Methos hadn't said so. Why would she want the three of them in the one place? An unpleasant conviction had begun to grow in him. There was more to this unholy tangle, he just hadn't managed to ferret it out yet.

"Yes, but that was different! So where are you now?" she'd demanded.
"Athens," he'd lied cheerfully, "and it's raining."

"Good!" she'd snapped and cut the connection.

He chuckled quietly to himself. Amanda would probably do her damndest to kill him if she found out he'd known more or less where her beloved Duncan was.

Some lights went out over on the marina. The boatyard was closing for the night. Its small workforce drove off, leaving one car paused at the roadside. A man swung the big gates closed, and Methos focussed the field glasses on him. The back of the man's head and shoulders filled his vision, collar turned up against the biting wind. Then he turned round, laughing, saying something to the driver of the waiting car, and Methos punched the air in delight.

"Yes!" he hissed.

He waited until the car drove off with its passenger, then he wrote a quick note, shoved it in an envelope and went out to drop it in the mailbox in the boatyard's gate. MacLeod would have a surprise in the morning.

###

"Rees?" A woman's voice, both warm and businesslike. "I'm Melissa Stone, returning the call you made a few days ago; Joseph is in the hospital at the moment, and likely to be out of action for a while. I'm covering for him. How can I help you?"

"Uh, it's about Duncan MacLeod," he said cautiously.

"I gathered that. I was just coming into the room when your call came through, couldn't get to the phone before you hung up. I couldn't call you back immediately, and this is the first chance I've had to follow up. It's good he's finally appeared. Joseph will be over the moon. If you're sure it's him."

"I'm sure."

"You've spoken to him?"

"God, no!" he lied. "My name's not Dawson."

"Sensible man." She laughed, and he could almost see the rueful smile. "Sometimes I wish Joseph had been as wise, but you know how it is with some immortals. They have a knack of getting under your skin."

"Not my skin," he snapped. "Ms Stone, I'm in Research, not Field. I can't be his Watcher."

"I appreciate that, and you've done the right thing. I guess that's my job as a substitute Joseph now Duncan has surfaced at last. Where is he living?"

"I haven't found that out, but he works for Gervais Dubosc in the boatyard at Surtainville."

"Good work. You can leave it to me. I'll be on my way to Normandy very soon. Will you be staying around, Rees?"
"No way. I'm supposed to be on holiday."

"Fine. Enjoy the rest of your vacation, and thanks for this. Do you want the credit of the sighting? You're certainly entitled to it."

"No," he said quickly. "He's all yours. I intend to forget I ever saw him."

She laughed again. "Poor Duncan. Still, it's reassuring he can't sweep everyone off their feet with that charisma of his. Goodbye, Rees."

###

"Sensei," Matthieu said, sticking his head round the workshop door, "Boss wants you in the office."

"Thanks." Wiping his hands on a piece of greasy rag, MacLeod trotted across the yard. Automatically he took a swift glance towards the road and the bookshop, but the Watcher wasn’t in sight. "Yes, Boss?" he said from the doorway of the office.

"You've got a letter," Gervais said. "Unstamped and in the yard's mailbox."

MacLeod smiled as he accepted the envelope. It could be from Evans to say he'd finally decided to follow the advice and leave town. He didn't turn it over to look at the address on the front, just opened it and took out the single sheet of paper.

He recognised the handwriting at once, and something inside gave a painful lurch.

"Duncan?" Gervais said.

He didn't answer.

'I'm in the area for a few days. Care to join me for dinner tonight? 8 o'clock in the Chateau D'Or, Barneville-Carteret. I'm buying. You can pay next time.

Adam' 

"Duncan!"

"Uh, sorry. It's from a friend I haven't seen for years."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic about the reunion," Gervais observed. "A problem?"

"No, no problem, just unexpected. It's an invite to dinner at the Chateau D'Or."

"A friend with expensive tastes." Gervais grinned. "I hope she's also beautiful."

MacLeod chuckled. "No, I wouldn't say he's beautiful," he said, "but I don't think he's ever had a problem finding a lady when he wants one."

"So is he the one you wrote to a while back?"

"Are you fishing, Gervais?" he said, smiling.
"Of course I am!" Gervais offered him an engaging and unrepentant grin. "I'm very nosy."

"Yeah, you can say that again." But there wasn't an edge to his voice. "No, that was Joe. This is Adam."

"Does he play rugby?"

###

MacLeod parked his Citroen beside the hotel and switched off the ignition. He leaned his arms on the steering wheel and gazed sightlessly out at the darkness. Did he really want to be here? It was an argument he'd been having with himself since he had first read the note. The answer was still an unequivocal 'yes'. But it didn’t stop the doubt that gnawed at him.

Out there was Methos. An enigma that insisted he was 'just a guy'. Yeah, right. Five thousand years or only the twenty-something-maybe-thirty that showed in his features, Methos would never be 'just' anything. Whatever he was, MacLeod had missed him more than he had thought possible. Had missed all three of them, Joe and Amanda as well.

He sighed, loneliness closing in on him again. He'd known Methos for years; since March 6th, 1995, to be exact, yet the actual amount of time he'd spent in the man's company was probably less than a year. Methos would appear, spend a few days, sometimes weeks, in Paris or Seacouver, and then would be gone for months. No phone-calls, emails or letters would arrive, but the man would turn up out of the blue as casually as if he'd been away only a few days.

After Bordeaux and later Ahriman, the gaps became longer, but MacLeod had discovered a kind of compensation. Somehow, against all accepted knowledge and past experience, he’d discovered he could identify a quickening. Just one. As if he'd grown more sensitive, but only to Methos. He'd swiftly learned to recognise the man's unique dissonance.

He'd felt the change first in the Elysium graveyard. A Presence had sunk cold shards into him, a painful, icy dissonance like no quickening he'd experienced before, and the shock of it had at first blurred the already vague images that came with it. At their second meeting he'd realized this was Methos' signature, the essential core of the man, and it was only his quickening that spoke to MacLeod so clearly.

From then on, with Methos wandering God knows where, it would suddenly strike its subtle blades into him, a signal that the man was back in his life and triggered. Every time it triggered a rush of pleased relief that outweighed the discomfort.

The hows and whys had haunted him for months. Still did, if it came to that. The strange double quickening had to be part of the answer, but there was no one MacLeod could talk to about it. While he counted Joe as a close and trusted friend, all his instincts shouted against mentioning it to the Watcher.

Occasionally he’d find himself on the brink of telling Methos he’d come to recognize his Presence, but always drew back before the words were spoken. He couldn’t guess how Methos would react to the news, and wouldn’t risk the man disappearing from his life on a permanent basis. Methos' friendship was far too important to him.

And yet he put potential strain on that friendship by disappearing himself. Sometimes, he thought
morosely, I doubt my own sanity.

MacLeod got out of the car and walked slowly toward the entrance. He wore a new grey-green silk-knit sweater and black pants. His hair was neat, the heavy waves sleeked back into the silver clasp he'd forgotten about until he'd found it in his wash-bag when he was getting ready to visit Madame. He knew he looked okay, would pass muster with the doorman, unless the hotel had a necktie policy for its restaurant. He'd left his jacket behind on the back seat of the car, the billhook hidden beneath it. No one was likely to challenge him in the Chateau D'Or.

So far he caught no hint of Methos. A nervous tension thrashed its wings in his belly, an uncomfortable mixture of anticipation and wariness. MacLeod came to a halt at the bottom of the flight of wide steps that led up to the main doors. There had been nothing in the brief note to warn him of rancor, animosity. It was a perfectly reasonable, casual invitation to dinner. So why was he making a drama out of it?

Because he knew from past experience you could never trust Methos to do the expected, be the expected. Nor could he be certain their friendship was still solid. MacLeod took a few steps back, out of the light that spilled from the doorway. He centered himself, and using the skill he'd been honing on a daily basis, he extended his quickening, searching for the first tenuous touch--

Polar ice, ancient, deep and still: cool silk that whispered over his nerve-ends with a sensuous chill and the glittering pain of blades that sank past every guard to flay or defend. With an almost fearful reluctance, MacLeod pulled back from the contact, wrapped his quickening like a cloak about him. Then he steeled himself and walked up the steps into Methos' Presence.

###

The gossamer-touch of warmth slid into Methos' awareness, resonating in synch with his own wildfire and he bit back a surprised gasp. He'd been waiting for it, but he hadn’t expected the overwhelming relief that came with it. The harmonics sank deep into him, filling up the empty spaces, bringing heat to the fimbul-winter of his soul. It struck him as ironic and right that this Dark Solstice Child should bring summer with his Presence.

Abruptly that Presence was gone. Startled, Methos came to his feet. MacLeod had changed his mind, retreated--

The resonance came back and now it was no light brush. This time it had substance and weight, a deep thrum of power that shuddered through Methos' bones. He gropped for his chair and sat down again. The furnace was no longer merely hinted at beyond the hearth-fire. It was there, as real as the sheathed blade and the velvet, more powerful than it should be. Okay, he'd taken the quickenings of Connor MacLeod and the very strong Jacob Kell since they had last met. But quickenings did not vary, regardless of age or heads taken, so what the hell had the man been doing? It felt as if MacLeod had concentrated his quickening, drawn it closer about him, which was not a good idea if he wanted to keep a low profile.

Then MacLeod was in the doorway of the restaurant, and the Maitre'd escorted him to Methos' table. The immortal moved with the smooth, leopard grace that could stop the breath, and it told Methos more clearly than words that MacLeod was cautious, unsure of his welcome despite the friendly invitation.
Paradoxically, it also helped Methos regain his equilibrium. Plan A initiated. "Hello, MacLeod," he said. "Glad you could make it." He was aware of the many pairs of eyes tracking MacLeod across the room, their attention unconsciously drawn by that condensed quickening, and he relished the interest and envy he knew others were feeling. He let his gaze drift over body and features, appreciating the view with a connoisseur's delight. "You're looking good for a dead man." That was an understatement. MacLeod looked better than good.

"A what?"

"It's a long story. First we eat and socialize, so enjoy it. We can talk business later. So what have you been doing with yourself since I saw you last?"

"Not a lot."

"You've been practicing some of Darius' favorite party tricks, haven't you?"

"Well, yes. After Kell, I thought I'd better—Wait, how do you know?"

"Oh, good grief." Methos sighed. "You really do need a keeper. Diffuse, MacLeod. Spread yourself as far and as thin as you can. That's the trick to practice. Then any immortal with hostile intent that brushes up against your quickening will think you're a potential only and not bother with you. While you have more time to get the hell out of Dodge." He didn't make a habit of giving away trade secrets, especially this one, but MacLeod was a special case.

"Ah. So that's how you do it. The Methos School of Survival Techniques."

"Works for me," he said with a shrug. They could discuss quickenings later. Much later. "Enough of that. This is the social hour, remember? Where did you go?"

"Hungary, Poland, Spain."

"So it was you in Budapest," Methos said. "Congratulations; apart from that one hiccup, you've managed to avoid the Watchers for five years. I haven't been to Budapest for more than a century. How is the old place?"

For the rest of the meal they reminisced cities and centuries, and MacLeod gradually relaxed into the easy companionship. So did Methos. He'd missed this, wasn't inclined to lose it now he had it back. Now MacLeod was back.

"So, did you find your answers?" Methos asked as they finished their brandies and he waited for the bill.

"No." MacLeod's smile was self-mocking and sad. "You're right. There aren't any to find."

"And it's taken you how long to admit it?" Methos snorted. "What will you do now? Have you made any plans?"

"Some. I want to stay around here, for at least part of the time. For the rest--I don't know. I'd like to go back to Paris every now and then, but I'll need to find myself another base there. I sold the barge," he said with a regretful shrug. "Again. It seemed a good idea at the time."

"I have an apartment overlooking the Parc Monceau," Methos said quietly. "It's a big place; mi casa es su casa, whenever you want, for as long as you want."

MacLeod's colour rose slightly. "Thank you," he said, voice husky and sincere. He hesitated, then:
"Methos," he said suddenly, a plea in his voice. "I had to go. You understand, don't you?"

Methos studied his empty glass in silence for a moment. "Yes," he said eventually. "I've been there, done that, more than once. I understand, but don't push your luck, MacLeod," he went on with something of his usual bite. "This was a great meal with fine wines and I'm inclined to be tolerant for now."

"Joe and Amanda, do they--"

"Of course. Let's face it, you could turn into Genghis Khan and Joe would find a way to understand and forgive. As for Amanda--" He raked his eyes over his companion again. "There's only one thing she'd never get over. If you were ever to permanently lose your genitals...." MacLeod laughed, flush deepening. "Come on," Methos continued, "let's get out of here. It's time we talked business." Plan A, Step Two.

It was late, gone midnight, and the northeast wind still scoured along the coast. They drove the short distance to the beach, left their cars in the parking lot, and walked along the sand into the arctic blast.

"You actually want to live here?" Methos hunched deeper into his long coat, hands buried in his pockets. "In winter?"

"Why not?" MacLeod was strolling along in his dark work-jacket as if the wind-chill factor wasn’t approaching a minus double figure.

"Definitely a keeper. By the way, where is your sword?"

"Safe."

"Safe is inside a coat like this one, MacLeod, not stuck in where-ever-it-is. Are you making a habit of this? Leaving it hidden away when the world pisses you off and you decide you're going to have an existential crisis?"

MacLeod flushed again. "No!" he snapped. "It wasn't like that. I--just wanted a weapon that wasn't--so distinctive."

"So 'Duncan MacLeod'?" Methos snickered. "What do you carry around now?"

"I'm a workman," he said defensively. "I have a bag of tools in the car."

"Yes, and?"

"A billhook."

Methos started to laugh, then stopped as he visualized the item in question. "Bloody hell," he muttered. "The damage you could do with that. I think I'd sooner face the katana. Have you had to use it?"

"No, not once. Five years without a challenge, Methos. It's been good."

"Yeah," Methos drawled. "I know. I've been there. Would still be there if a certain Scot I know hadn't blundered into my life." MacLeod was silent, and Methos sighed again. "Your bottom lip is sticking out," he announced.

"It is not!" MacLeod responded, stung to indignation. "I don't--"
"Yes, you do. When are you going to collect the sword?"

"Soon."

"When?"

"Soon! Get off my case, Methos!"

"This isn't me nagging you. This is me nagging you like Joe would if he was here. And he will nag when he realizes you're not carrying. Again. So I thought I'd save him the bother."

"Very funny."

"And while we're on the subject of swords, the Watchers have you officially listed as dead."

MacLeod gaped at him. "Dead? You said that before. You're not serious!"

"Very."

And gave him a brief and cynically flippant précis of the last five years in the MacLeod chronicles, as far as the Watchers had it, culminating with Kuon Lo. "Joe knows you weren't the guy killed in Vienna," Methos went on. "I checked out the report, found it wasn't as kosher as they thought, and put him straight. But he wanted it kept quiet. Said it was up to you to decide if it should be known you were still in the Game."

"I'm not in the Game," MacLeod said with quiet intensity. "I haven't been for many years and if I have any say in it I never will be!"

"Amen," Methos said piously.

"So who is this Kuon Lo?"

"Wrong tense, MacLeod." Methos shrugged. "There's only one way I could be sure the other guy hadn't been you. I took out Kuon Lo and he wasn't."

"You--took out Kuon Lo," MacLeod echoed. Then did a belated double take as the words sunk in. "You can recognise my quickening?"

"Don't be ridiculous. He had someone else's memories, not yours," he said in the tones of one explaining 'See Spot run' to a child. But his instincts had suddenly woken up. Why had MacLeod jumped to that conclusion rather than the more obvious memory thing? That was interesting.

"Okay, who was he?" MacLeod demanded. "The man pretending to be me?"

"Apart from very dead?" Methos shrugged again. "He was tall, long dark hair tied back, good-looking if you like that kind of thing, and now headless. He was Robert Chrétien from Quebec and he had been set up. Does the name Melissa Stone mean anything to you?"

"No, never heard of her. Why is she after me?"

"We have no idea. I was hoping you could tell us. She was behind the young Chrétien, groomed him to be you. She seems to be trying to bring you out into the open."

"Shit! Why didn't you tell me right from the start? If she wants me that badly she can have a try for me! We could be back in Paris by now!"

"Exactly."

Methos came to a halt and turned his back to the wind. His hair was immediately a wild tangle around his face, whipping into his eyes, reminding him that he was long overdue a visit to
the barbers. "You've just given yourself the answer. She is targeting Amanda at the moment, and if that doesn't work probably Joe and me eventually. We don't know her motives or scenario, but we do know she is mortal and she favours long-range rifles. With any luck, she's in Paris, shadowing Amanda, waiting for you or me to show up to the rescue, so will you please tell me where the logic is in heading straight to her? As of the last time I checked, the Watchers still have you as dead. She knows you aren't, but she doesn't know where you are and she doesn't know that we know you aren't and it's getting so tangled I have a headache. Amanda and Joe want you to stay away."

"Stay away?" MacLeod repeated. "But--"

"No buts, and you're sounding like a parrot. We have it under control. Amanda's covering Joe's back, he's covering hers, I'm covering yours."

"And who is watching your back?" MacLeod demanded.

"You," Methos said.

"So you'll be staying around for more than a few days?"

Methos recognised the hope in MacLeod's voice and smiled. "Off and on," he said.

"Did Joe send any messages for me?" It was said casually, but Methos heard the wistful undertones.

"Only that you're to stay away. He hasn't seen your letter," Methos said. "It's a long story, and I'm not going to tell you all of it yet. I got to your letter first and I haven't passed it on. As well as this Stone woman, Joe's up to his ears in official Watcher trouble. I wasn't about to run the risk of it ending up on the database."

"Evans told me he'd been shunted sideways into Research," MacLeod said, "because he shot someone to protect my back."

"Yes, well, what he actually did was empty the gun into the bastard. In my opinion he was bloody lucky to have got away with only a transfer. He could have been up on a full-scale murder charge."

"I didn't know," MacLeod sighed. "Damn it, I should have gone to Paris as soon as Evans told me. But I figured that if Joe had wanted me to know, he'd've told me."

"Dead right. Just remember that and keep your arse planted securely in Normandy for a while. But what I want to know is, who is this omnipotent Evans?"

"A Watcher. He said it was pure chance that he saw me. He was just passing through, and recognised me as I came out of a shop."

"When?" Methos demanded sharply.

"Nearly a week ago. He's been hanging around ever since. Not really Watching, just keeping the occasional eye on me." He frowned. "Why hasn't he reported me? He knows who and what I am."

"And knows you well enough to engage in social chit-chat," Methos said with a wry smile.

"Hardly social." MacLeod smiled back. "He doesn't like immortals in general and me in particular." The smile faded. "I swore an Oath!" he added in a fair imitation of Evans' Welsh lilt. "But he won't leave. I've warned him off, but he won't buy it."
"Well, that was smart. What self-respecting Watcher is going to bugger off just because a big bad immortal says 'Boo, go away'?"

"It's for his own good," MacLeod protested. "Someone's got it in for Gervais and his people, and they're starting to play hard-ball. I thought Evans would be better off out of it, as he isn't a field agent. He's in Research--"

"So you're telling me," Methos interrupted with a deceptive mildness, "that these people have got themselves some unpleasant enemies, and you're going to stay here and help them out?"

"Yes," said MacLeod.

"I see." His smile was a savage baring of teeth. "What was it you said in your letter to Joe? 'Too often people I care about have been hurt and killed, and I don't know if I can take it anymore'. So the last five years have been--what? Circumnavigating the planet a few times so you can write chatty little holiday articles for magazines? A self-indulgent exercise in futility?"

"I owe Gervais Dubosc," MacLeod said grimly. His face reddened and his chin set in the stubborn jut Methos knew so well and hungered to smash with his fists.

"You--owe him," he repeated. "For what, precisely?"

"He risked his life to save mine. I was drowning--"

"You can't drown!" Methos shouted. "Not permanently!"

"He didn't know that!" MacLeod yelled back. "And he can!"

"When will you learn that your particular brand of skewed chivalry went out of fashion a hundred years ago--if it was ever in fashion to begin with!"

"So I'm staging a one-man revival!"

Methos lost his temper. In a split second the rational part of his brain had known that he'd only have a chance at one blow. He made it count, a bone-breaking right cross delivered with all his strength to shatter MacLeod's nose and his own knuckles, while he spat a litany of curses in a language he hadn't used in five thousand years.
Chapter 18

When MacLeod regained consciousness, he discovered Methos kneeling on his chest, hands locked around his throat, and his head being thumped into the hard-packed sand as punctuation to the incomprehensible diatribe hissed at him. He focussed one eye with difficulty. The other was swollen closed. He tried to speak, but failed. His attacker paused.

"You didn't understand a word I said, did you?" Methos said mildly, letting go of his throat and sitting back on his heels. "Not one word."

"Didn't need to," MacLeod croaked. "Got the idea--pissed at me."

"Bright boy."

"Gerroff."

"No." Methos settled his weight more securely, knees digging into MacLeod's shoulders. "Has it dawned on you why I'm a little annoyed, or do I have to spell it out in words of one syllable?"

He knew why, or thought he did. Methos' idea of risk-taking and his were usually diametrically opposed. "I owe Gervais," MacLeod said stubbornly, "and if you've made me bleed on this sweater, I'll show you what annoyed looks like."

"Empty threats. Who is sitting on whom?"

"You took me by surprise and I didn't want to hurt you. I can change my mind about that."

"MacLeod, there is a hostile Watcher following you, there is an almost certainly homicidal female hunting you, and you want to get involved in a local squabble. Any pain I inflict on you is justified up to and including multiple deaths. Joe and Amanda would be taking turns as well if they were here."

"You've made your point," MacLeod said sullenly. "But I can't walk away from this. I owe him, Methos."

"What do you owe Joe, and Amanda?"

"What do you want me to say?" MacLeod shouted, and heaved Methos off his chest in a convulsive surge of strength to send him sprawling on the sand. "Yes, I owe them!" He came to his feet, poised to retaliate if necessary. "I owe them the right to make their own choice to accept the risk that goes with me, or not! So I'll offer you a deal, Methos. I can stay here and help out Gervais, or I can go to Paris and take the heat off Amanda. Your call."

"Unacceptable." Methos stood up, reaching for his blade. But he didn't draw it.

"Tough." Then the anger and the stubbornness became a weary contrition MacLeod did his best to hide. "I don't want to fight with you," he said. "I--value your friendship," he added with a formality that he could only hope would hide the emotion in him.

Methos groaned and clutched his hair. "Damn you, MacLeod! When did you learn to fight so dirty?"

"What?" MacLeod stared at him in wary confusion.
"Never mind." He sighed. "Now give me the lowdown on your current quest, Sir Lancelot."

"Damn it, it's not like that!"

"Okay; Don Quixote."

"Methos!"

"I don't suppose you're ever likely to pass up the odd windmill when they cross your path," he said with another, overdone, sigh. "Still, I live in hope. Go and clean up with some seawater," he went on, holding out a handkerchief. "Then you may as well come back to my hotel for a coffee, and we can at least be warm while you explain this particular wind-driven device. I'm staying in Surtainville."

"You are? Then why the Chateau D'Or?"

"Neutral ground, and a strong recommendation from Madame Leroux. She runs my hotel."

"Okay." MacLeod shrugged, grateful for the reprieve but unsure why it had been granted. For a while it had been like old times, the easy, relaxed flow of talk, the banter, Methos sliding in the odd comment aimed at tipping him off balance. The familiar wicked glint of amusement in his fathomless eyes. At times like that MacLeod was reminded this man was over five thousand years old, and that for good or ill there was very little under the sun and moon that he hadn't seen, hadn't done. No question about it, Methos was in top form.

###

"Come on in," Methos said breezily, opening the door and switching on the lights. "This is a very civilized establishment; no instant coffee, but good fresh ground beans and a cafetière, plus a small fridge for real cream if you fancy it. I like this place. Where are you staying?"

"With Gervais' grandparents, in a farmhouse just outside of Flamanville. They are good people, Methos."

"So you've adopted them into your clan?" he said with some exasperation.

"No." MacLeod chuckled quietly. "They've adopted me. So have the Bouvins. They think Matthieu and I look so much alike, Pierre Bouvin has had to do some fast talking about where he was thirty-odd years ago."

"Gods, another clone! Is this Matthieu mortal?"

"Yes, no question."

"Thank Heaven for small mercies." Methos closed the drapes, took off his coat and hung it up, held out his hand for MacLeod's jacket. He shrugged out of it and passed it over. Methos hefted the weight of the garment as he hung it beside his own, snickered and shook his head. "A billhook. Make the coffee, will you? I want to check out this Watcher of yours."

"He isn't mine," MacLeod grumbled. "He's a pain in the ass."

"Then you're a perfect match." Methos smiled with wry affection. "Wait a moment, take your
sweater off first. There's blood on it. I'll give it a cold-water rinse while you're making the coffee."

"Damn!" MacLeod pulled the garment over his head, inspected the few dark spatters, and swore again. His glare at Methos was not friendly.

"Don't start," Methos warned, and snatched the sweater from him. "Coffee. I'll deal with this." He disappeared into the en suite bathroom for a short while, and MacLeod began to prepare the coffee. Before the water had time to boil, Methos was back.

"The stains came out and it's drying on the towel rail. No one need ever know you were so careless with your clothes." He ignored MacLeod's snort of indignation, sat in one of the armchairs and parked the laptop on his knees. "How does your Watcher spell his name?" he asked as he powered it up.

"E.V.A.N.S.," MacLeod suggested with a saccharin smile.

"Smart-arse. Is he a R.h.y.s, R.e.e.s.e or a R.e.e.s? Never mind, I'll try all three. Ha. Here he is. North Wales Research, based in Wrexham. Well, he told that much truth."

"You think he might be working with Stone?"

"It's a possibility worth investigating."

"Is she anything to do with Horton?"

"Not as far as I can tell. He was the first angle I looked at, but I'm not ruling him out. You've made a lot of enemies over the years, especially since Joe outed the Watchers to you and drove a fleet of buses through his Oath, but so far I haven't found any that match up with Melissa. Oh, by the way, when we do find her, Amanda says she's hers."

"Oh, really?" MacLeod drawled.

"Really. Believe me. When she shot Amanda, she ruined a St. Laurent jacket and blouse. I've known 'Manda much longer than you have, and in case you haven't already realised it, I'll warn you this once. Kali dancing upon skulls is as nothing compared to the Darieux on a vengeance trail. No, Evans doesn't seem to have Ms Stone in his background, but don't trust him."

"I don't. Methos, she has to be a Watcher. She knows too much about them and us."

"I've investigated every Watcher on the database, but she isn't among them. But they have had a Phantom Hacker, and the odds are that was her. Believe me, I'll recognise her when I see her, Rob Chrétien's memories are quite clear. Come over here, MacLeod. I've done some sketches from them. Do you know her?"

MacLeod pressed down the cafetière's plunger, poured the coffee into classy heat-resistant glass mugs, then leaned on the back of the chair to peer over Methos' shoulder. "She's an attractive-looking woman," he said. "And no, I've never seen her before, I'm sure of it."

"Oh, well, it was worth a try," Methos said. "I was hoping you had. It would make life so much simpler."

"Sorry." MacLeod smiled. "What do you have on Evans?"

"His Research posting."
Obligingly he called it up and MacLeod reached over to scroll down the screen. "He told me his aunt was married to an immortal. Can we take a look at his recruitment circumstances?"

"Already did." But he keyed in the command and sent it anyway. MacLeod leaned closer to read it, aware on the edge of his perception of the scent of soap, of shampoo, and body-warmth. It was unsettling and comfortable at the same time, starting a slow coil of familiar heat through his blood. It reminded him that he desired this man, and that this was more than a physical need. He couldn't move. Almost from the beginning of their friendship, Methos had occasionally teased with an amused flirtation, as if just for the hell of it he was challenging MacLeod's preference for heterosexuality. Sometimes MacLeod had ignored it. Sometimes he'd responded in kind, meeting challenge with challenge and sharing the joke, but now something was different.

"MacLeod." It was a quiet murmur, a little deeper than Methos' usual voice. "What is my quickening like?"

"Silk," he said without thinking. "Ice, blades--" And stopped, gaze darting sideways to Methos' profile. The man had a small smile lifting one corner of his mouth, though his concentration remained on the screen. "How did you know?"

Methos laughed softly, turning his head a little so that MacLeod felt the touch of his breath on his cheek when he spoke. "Velvet." It was almost a whisper. "Hearth-fire and furnace, shield and sheathed sword."

Abruptly MacLeod was aware of Methos' quickening on a level he hadn't discovered before. Cool silk drifted across his senses, blades touched and didn't cut, ice burned into his blood and brought its own special contradictory fire. Desire was there as well, a hunger, and beneath, almost masked but not quite, simmered an awed wonder that found an echo in his own body. He heard himself gasp, heard Methos' sharply indrawn breath, heard the words drifting on a sigh. "Ignifer. Datorigni….

Startled and oddly disoriented, MacLeod pushed back from the chair, and the moment was lost. "What did you say?"

"Ignifer," Methos said cheerfully. "Now, let's hear about your windmill, MacLeod."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Duboscs' problems?" Methos gazed at him, wide-eyed and guileless, but there was a hint of colour on the lightly tanned cheekbones. "Someone's after the boatyard?"

"Uh, no." He put some space between them and sat on the arm of the other chair. Then he caught back his attention, forced himself to focus on the safe ground of Gervais and Carston. "Smugglers, almost certainly of people, and/or drugs. They'd been using an empty house up on the Cap."

"So where does the relative fit in?"

"Henri Pasquier. He was an estate agent, and the house was on his books."

"What's so special about it?"

"A private bay with sea access only and completely secluded. The situation was on hold, but there've been developments." Quickly MacLeod outlined the state of play so far, and Methos listened without comment. "Henri Pasquier is dead," he continued. "Suicide. But he's put an insurance policy in place and if I know Gervais, he'll feel honor-bound to stand by it." He recounted the gist of Henri's letter, and Methos' disgust was obvious.
"That is the most stupid--" he said. "What are you going to do about Carston?"

"Nothing I can do at the moment. Apparently Theroux and one of the others don't work for him any more, and the families have accepted that. I'd like to go to St Helier, check out his home ground."

"Good idea. What about the house? You're living with the Duboscs, you said, so Carston could still have access to it. Between the two of us, we can keep an eye on the place any time, day or night."

The 'we' brought a smile to MacLeod. Then he sobered. He didn't want to talk about smugglers, houses or the Duboscs. He wanted to ask what the hell had happened a few moments ago, but didn't. "If you like," he said instead, "once Evans is out of the way, we could go to the house tomorrow."

"You said he isn't budging."

"He isn't, but Yves has set up a meeting for him with the manager of the Bréval rugby club tomorrow lunchtime."

"Good for Yves." Methos shut down the computer, slid it onto the bedside table and sat back in his chair. He picked up his coffee and sipped it, frowning thoughtfully. "Darius' party tricks," he said. "What exactly are you doing, and why? Not that I'm criticizing. On the contrary. I'm also curious."

"Trying to draw in my quickening." MacLeod gave a self-depreciating shrug. "Trying to control it. Kell fought me in a way that no one had before, as if he could hammer me down with his will as well as his sword. Then recently it suddenly clicked in with something Darius had tried to teach me, and that Amanda and I used to play around with."

"My God," Methos said, awestruck. "That combination just about boggles the mind! Amanda's games aren't usually the kind a devoutly religious Christian monk is likely to want to teach you!"

MacLeod grinned. "You have a dirty mind," he said, a smirk growing, and gave a small quickening-nudge. Methos' mug of coffee jerked in his hand and the dark liquid came close to slopping over his fingers, startling him into a curse. "That. Only Kell used it like a poleax. At the time I didn't know what had hit me, and I still don't know how to fight it."

"I'll bet," Methos said, a certain amount of respect in his voice. "The more I learn about this Jacob Kell, the gladder I am never actually met the man. You did well stopping him when you did, MacLeod. Now, quickenings," he carried on briskly. "As far as I know, very few of us have done any real research on quickenings, which could be a good thing for those of us who have. Drawing in your quickening is good discipline, but so is expanding it. Spreading as far and as thin as you can, not only gives another immortal a false impression, it can also have an effect on how mortals see you as well. Or rather, not see. When you get really skilled at it, they sometimes tend to overlook you. It's a neat trick, if you can do it. Drawing your quickening in has the reverse effect; it focuses everyone's attention on you, mortal and immortal."

"Oh. Not quite what I was intending."

"Maybe not, but you might need it one day. Practice both, MacLeod. What else can you do?"

"Nothing of any obvious use," he said. "Darius taught me to see his quickening and my own. He tried to teach me to gather a fraction of mine between my hands, but I couldn't. Now I can."

"Show me."

"I can't do it without meditation," MacLeod said apologetically, standing up and kicking off his
shoes. "Besides, there isn't much to show. It's mostly a state of inner being."

Methos gave a snort. "Smartarse. Just get on with it."

MacLeod sighed, then relaxed and folded down into lotus in front of Methos' chair, sliding swiftly into the transcendental. He was aware that Methos had risen briefly to switch out the main overhead light, leaving just the one by the bed, then he turned inward.

###

Methos sank back in his armchair, shaking his head in bemused delight. The man was an artist's dream: all long muscles and honey-bronze skin and completely unselfconscious. With his eyes closed, face so serene and relaxed, he even looked years younger. Pure innocence, but not that of a child, nor of the feline hunter his strength and grace rivaled, but of his distant katana. A weapon created and honed, complete in its perfection: quiescent until the deadliness is called forth.

He shook off the distracting image. Something of greater importance required his attention: Plan A had been salvaged, Step Three had gotten rid of the sweater, Step Four had tested MacLeod's receptiveness, Step Five was imminent.

Sooner than Methos expected, MacLeod's hands moved from his knees, lifted to hold an invisible globe in front of him.

Methos waited a few moments, then started to ask if MacLeod could see what he sought. The words stopped in his throat. Pale blue wildfire grew between MacLeod's palms. From a glowing seed it became the size of a man's head, a luminous sphere netted with small lightnings. For a moment he was tempted to reach out and touch it. But he wasn't sure what would happen if he did, so he restrained himself. In his chest, his lodestone seemed to stir, to pulse in time with his heartbeat.

"That's all I can do," MacLeod murmured, voice distant and apologetic.

"Believe me, this is an incredible extravagance," Methos whispered. He slid out of the chair, his own legs folding automatically into the lotus position, almost but not quite touching MacLeod knee to knee.

"Is it? What am I supposed to do with it?"

Methos gave a shaky laugh. "Gods, I don't know," he admitted. "You've learned this since you came to Normandy?"

"Yes. I wish I could ask Darius," MacLeod said quietly.

"You and me both," he agreed. "Why not just look on it as a meditation thing and leave it at that?"

The sphere contracted and disappeared, leaving the room dull and dingy in comparison. MacLeod squinted at him, clearly surprised to see him so close. "But surely--"

"No buts," Methos interrupted. "This is new territory for me. I know Darius spent centuries studying and exploring his own quickening, and that of anyone else who could so much as raise a spark, but I was only in on those studies for a short time."
"Oh." A small sigh, not of disappointment exactly, but close to it. "What do you use it for?"

"Meditation, though I haven't used it for centuries. It's very--visible," he added, "and not easily explainable. Unless you want to be canonized. Or stoned to death."

"I can imagine. What happened to Darius' notes?"

Methos didn't answer. Step Five--he knew there was one, just couldn't remember what it was at the moment. Words scorched on his tongue, none of them anything to do with Darius or quickenings or ancient research. 'You are mine,' he wanted to say. 'I claim you and all that you are. I want to know what your mouth tastes like. I want to feel the life-pulse in your throat under my mouth, I want to hear your breath changing as I kiss down your chest. I want to hear my name on your lips when you come. I want to know what this mane feels like as it slides over my skin, I want your strength and vitality in my arms and in my bed, I want you and your passion and your hunger. But most of all, I want the fire within you, Ignifer, Datorigni.'

All that came out was "Duncan…." He stared down at his hands, clenched into fists over his ankles, and was locked into silence.

"Methos?" It was said with quiet concern, as of a man asking a sleeper what dreams troubled him.

"I have something that belongs to you." No, I don't! Don't listen to me!

MacLeod said nothing. Just as Methos was beginning to let out his pent-up breath in a sigh of relief, two very warm hands closed with infinite care on his shoulders and began a gentle massage of the rigid muscles. The tender solicitude in those hands was more than he could bear. The instinct to stay silent fought with a deeper instinct: offer the truth--all of it--and as a gift, not a weapon as he had once before. "At Bordeaux," he whispered, "when Kronos jumped from you to me, he brought part of your quickening with him." The massage didn't stop or falter. Nor did MacLeod speak. "I still have it. Here, inside me." He lifted his own hands to his chest, held them folded one over the other on his breastbone. "Do you want it back?"

"No," MacLeod murmured. "You've taken care of it all this time, that makes it yours now, if you want it."

"I do."

"I'm glad."

"Then there's something of mine you might want. In exchange." Somehow he managed to concentrate enough to summon his own quickening to his hands, so that when he dropped them to his lap, he held a small dense sphere of eye-searing brilliance, a fragment of the life energy within him.

"Yes, please…."

But he didn't give it. Could not. Nor did he know for certain it was possible to give it. "You need to know about me first. What I was, and still am." Once more MacLeod was silent. There was no pressure, no questioning, just the skilled fingers kneading at the shuddering tension, and the cloak of a Datorigni's caring enfolding him. Only Darius before him had ever given that priceless gift. Six years ago, MacLeod himself could not have done it. This was now, but memory supplied the gut-wrenching 'We're through--'. "When we first met up, I told you everything was hazy before my first head. I lied."

Laboriously, Methos dismantled the walls of ice and adamant he'd built around his lodestone.
There could be nothing for him to hide behind, not with this man, and if he lost MacLeod, he'd just have to do all he could to rebuild the friendship, the trust, or deal with the loss. "As soon as I could walk I had a slingshot. As I grew I was given a knife, a bow, a spear. Not toys. Tools of flint, sharp as broken glass. I killed a rich man. He had a bronze blade, and I took it for my own. I don't know how old I was, maybe nine or ten. Pre-puberty, anyhow.

"I was part of a small--tribe, for want of a better word, though we were more like a pack of ferals. We lived by raiding, and the few women who managed to live through the brutalities and childbirth, brought up whatever children survived. There was no family structure as such. If anyone, adult, child or newborn was sickly, they were abandoned. If the tribe found an exposed infant that seemed fit and strong, like me, they raised it. But usually they took the older children, boys, ones who could fight." It was a bald statement of facts; just another variation on a theme, a theme as old as immortals themselves, its beginning lost in the distant past. The abandoned infant, raised by strangers. Every immortal had travelled that route one way or another.

"It was a hard life, brutal, but we never starved. I was good at it, the fighting, the killing, the planning. I was lucky, too. No major injuries, and what wounds I did collect healed clean. The raids I planned worked, we got away with more stuff and fewer injuries. I was their Luck, they said." He paused to draw in a shuddering breath. "I was Death, long before I rode with Kronos." MacLeod's hands didn't hesitate, nor pull away, so he was able to go on.

"We had no herds, no fields, no village. We took what we wanted from others--food, goods, women, children, drifting from place to place. Until they stopped us. A cluster of villages banded together and set up a pack-train as bait, and ambushed us when we hit it. They killed us all, men, women, children, and left us for the scavengers.

"I'd been taken down with a sling-stone." He raised his hand briefly to his temple, let it drop back. "Maybe it killed me, I don't know. When I woke up I was on my back and a man was pushing a spear into my belly. He twisted it when he pulled it out, and he was laughing and crying at the same time. Then I died.

"I don't know how old I was," he whispered, feeling unutterably weary. "Mid-twenties, maybe. What do years matter? Mortal or immortal, time is meaningless if you learn nothing. They had just cause, but I didn't see it that way. They'd destroyed my people, everything I'd known, everything I had, and I wanted vengeance!" The passion, the bitter fury were there in his voice. "So I took it, the way I'd taken everything else in my life. I trailed them back to their villages and I preyed on them. For years. Every one I killed, I took the head and brought it back to the place where we'd died and set it on poles. I was Death, MacLeod, never doubt it. Legends were made because of me. I was a god--their demon--and they raised altars to me. I never did work out if it was to appease me or drive me away. Neither worked. When I killed them, I piled their bodies on those altars."

Methos was silent for a moment, leaning into the massage, breathing hard, waiting for the old emotions to loosen their hold on him. Only the gentle heat of the Ignifer's mantle kept him anchored safe in the now, and still those brief words hadn't been spoken again. 'We're through....'. He leaned forward, began to lift his hands to his face, but MacLeod mirrored his initial movement and their foreheads touched. Somehow it gave him the strength to go on.

"They killed me more than once, but I always came back. They didn't. After a while, I noticed that I had far more heads than there'd been ambushers. I didn't care and I didn't stop."

Methos tried to laugh, but it was a travesty. "No excuses, Duncan. I knew what I was doing. I knew they'd struck at us with the same savagery we'd taught them. I knew that years had passed, and the people I was murdering hadn't had any part in killing my people, and I didn't care. Shit, they hadn't
even been born when it had happened. They were alive, my people weren't. So they died." He paused again to catch his breath, breathing as hard as if he was approaching the end of an uphill race. Still MacLeod said nothing, did nothing except soothe.

"I'd already discovered that some of those I'd killed had felt different before they'd died, and when I'd hacked their heads off, lightning had gone from them to me. I discovered I learned things from the lightning. Memories that weren't mine: places and people I'd never seen before, so I started to hunt them down, these special ones. I began to experiment. Found out quite a lot. Doctor Mengele would have been proud." This time the laugh was more successful, the sound bitter in the still room.

"Deep inside, I was ice, always have been. But over the top of it there was so much rage and hate. It hadn't lessened over the centuries. If anything it had grown. I wanted them to feel it, Duncan. The hate, the rage, the agony--I wanted to burn it into the soul of the world the way it had been burned into mine.

"Then this man turned up. He said he'd been looking for me. His eyes met mine and all the chaos inside me was transmuted. It became a glorious, towering thing; he took it and gave it back to me, purified to a terrible perfection.

"Kronos. He--I didn't know what he'd been doing before he found me. All I knew was that if I went to him, we could raise death and destruction to an art form. So I did, and we did, and for the first time in a thousand years I was content. I loved him, Duncan, him and Silas and Caspian. In some way, I always will. I needed him as much as he needed me. No one could give him what I did.

"Time--just slipped through my fingers. Then I began to discover I didn't need quite so much. But I had questions that had no answers, lots of them, and they became more important. The glory was fading…." He stopped, dragged one more juddering breath into his lungs. "Kronos didn't make me what I am, neither did the raiders who brought me up, nor the men who destroyed them. I didn't leave the Horsemen because I was guilt-ridden and revolted by the life I'd led. I left simply because destruction wasn't enough anymore! That's all! Yes, I have regrets, but--the ice was there, in me, right from the start, from the moment I was born. It still is. I am Death."

"You changed," MacLeod said, a deep certainty in the quiet voice.

"No!" Methos said vehemently. "I didn't! That's the point of this--you have to know, I'm still the same man!"

"You changed," MacLeod repeated. His hands had never stilled throughout the telling, and they didn't pause now. "You changed enough to want to make the choice. Okay, you maybe have to make that choice every day of your life, every waking hour, but you make it. That's the point, Methos. Not redemption or guilt, just the simple recognition that destruction for its own sake might be fun for a while, but when something's destroyed, it can teach you nothing, show you nothing, except the hollow knowledge that something irreplaceable is gone." The words sank home, each one a separate truth, and Methos could not speak.

The silence stretched. Their brows still touched and beads of moisture dropped onto Methos' hands through the blue-white sear of his quickening; sweat or tears, his or MacLeod's, he didn't know. More than Datorigni-velvet enfolded him; the shield was there, as steady and impenetrable as a rock-face between him and any outside threat. "Do you still want it?" he asked huskily.

"Yes," MacLeod whispered.

The relief almost undid him. At first he was unsure, then instinct took over. Methos raised the
small globe, offered it; touched it to the glistening bronze of MacLeod's chest, and it was absorbed as simply and easily as water on a dry sponge.

MacLeod gasped and his head fell back a little way, exposing the vulnerable column of his throat. The massage finally ceased. Warm hands moved to cup Methos' skull as if they held a chalice, and MacLeod leaned forward again. Methos' mouth was taken in a kiss that balanced the scalpel edge between innocence and carnality, and with it came both benison and covenant.

Joyous delirium rushed through him and with a moan he slumped, his sudden weight tipping MacLeod back to sprawl on the rug. Methos went with him, their mouths still locked, tongues starting a gentle glide. Two pairs of long legs untangled from lotus without, Methos noted with a lunatic delight, dislocating anything.

Finally, he told himself, The Plan was back on course and he had MacLeod exactly where he'd intended he should be. More or less. The bed would be nice, but he wasn't that fussy. Except The Plan had been torn up and scattered to the winds the instant he had spoken MacLeod's given name against all intent. He said it again, whispered it into a mouth that drank his breath like a man dying of thirst. "Duncan…." 

The response was immediate. MacLeod's body writhed beneath him, slow and supple in the sensuous stretch of a feline. The name had become a spell-word, a two-syllable incantation that gave him access to all that MacLeod was and he took full advantage of it.

Methos deepened the kiss, aware of the throbbing heat of their erections pinned between them and reveled in it. Sooner or later he'd get round to that, but you never rush a gourmet feast. He said something to that effect, moving his lips to MacLeod's throat and finding the racing pulse there. At the same time he edged his hips far enough away to get his hands on MacLeod's waistband, felt tugs at his shirt and shifted again to give MacLeod access. Before he lost his pants, he managed to scrabble the tube of lubricant out of his pocket. He wanted that within easy reach.

"You planned this?" MacLeod whispered.

"Part of it," he replied honestly. "Everything else is a glorious bonus."

MacLeod began to laugh, until Methos shut him up with his mouth. Their bodies came together as if drawn by magnets and the incredible jolt of skin-on-skin almost cost Methos his last shred of control--almost but not quite. Then he became aware of something else. Every touch, every caress and kiss had an echo in his own body. He had worked his way down to the dark aureoles of MacLeod's nipples, was suckling mouth and teeth on one and relishing the waves of sensation that surged from his own nipple to genitals as if it was MacLeod's lips on him.

Which was impossible, because all MacLeod was doing with his mouth was trying to breath and gasp his name. But the man was an Ignifer, though come to think of it Darius had never said sex with a Datorigni would be quite like this. Or maybe it was the gifts they had exchanged, or a combination of the two. Or maybe he should stop thinking and get on with Plan A….

Methos slid further down MacLeod's body and dipped his tongue into his navel, intrigued to feel it happen to him. If he concentrated a little, he thought he would be able to block out the connection, but why would he want to? Gradually he nuzzled lower, sought the weeping head of MacLeod's cock and drew it slowly into his mouth. MacLeod bucked under him, nearly choking him. The man's breath was keening in his throat, voice pleading, hands urgent in Methos' hair.

The taste of him was all Methos had dreamed it would be, and more, and another time he would spend as long as possible there. But he had another goal in mind. He moved away, hands tugging at
MacLeod's hip. "Turn over," he whispered.

"No," MacLeod panted, resisting the pull. "Want to watch your face."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I know. You won't. Methos, do it. I want you in me." He spread his legs, raising one knee to give Methos better access to his body.

Methos knelt between his thighs, groped for the tube and took off the cap. The gel was still warm from his pocket, but not as hot as his lover's heated flesh. MacLeod gasped in shock as the first slick finger pressed at his anus, and if it had not been for the sharing, Methos might have stopped. He knew it was the temperature of the lubricant, not discomfort nor reluctance that made the tight ring of muscle clamp down on him. Made his own sphincter grip a ghost intruder.

He took some deep breaths, schooled himself to relax, and tried an experiment. He spread the gel liberally on one hand and stroked it over his own penis. MacLeod moaned and arched into it as if it was his own body being anointed. As he did so, Methos reached down and slid two fingers past the slackening muscles and found the prostate nerves.

Sensation exploded through him and he shuddered on the brink of orgasm. He was losing this. It was too intense to control and MacLeod was no help. The man's need and hunger were surging through the bond between them, augmenting the wildfire. Methos gave himself to it. It was too soon, but he withdrew his fingers and pushed forward, the head of his cock seeking the small opening between MacLeod's buttocks. At the same time MacLeod rocked his hips, knees coming up to close around Methos' ribs, and then Methos was sinking home into the sheath of MacLeod's body. Distantly he was aware of a subtle cocoon of blue-white fire weaving about them both, and he could no longer tell where he ended and his lover began. Joined in body, in soul and quickening fire they soared to a completion that left them dazed and boneless in each other's arms.
He awoke gradually and the world reformed around him. He lay cushioned in cool silk behind barricades of ice and defended by blades. He lay on a hotel carpet, its fibers harsh against his skin, and all was as it should be. Awareness spread. A long, lean body was stretched along his side, and he could almost hear the purr of contentment. All was right with his world.

Except his world wasn't quite as it was before. Something had happened that wasn't in the normal run of things. While he might have expected that making love with Methos would be pretty special, the reality had been--


"So where do we go from here?" MacLeod murmured. He stroked his hand down the lightly tanned flank, won a humming sigh and a slow writhe from his lover. Pleasure sang through his blood--his, Methos'--it didn't matter. Nor did it matter that Methos appeared to be reading his mind. That, too, was as it should be.

"How about bed? Floors are fine, but beds are better."

"Did you know whatever that was would happen?"

"Nope. Hadn't a clue." Euphoria drifted between them. At a guess, Methos had indeed not known, nor cared.

Methos burrowed closer, showing no signs of wanting to move to the bed or anywhere else. 'Don't talk, just be.' The thought curled through MacLeod's mind with the feather-touch of a caress and the room lurched. For a brief moment he was lying with his head on a wide shoulder cushioned with muscle, his face turned into the silk swathe of long, tangled hair. Then something shifted and settled in his psyche, and he was Duncan MacLeod again.

Methos was nuzzling into his throat, muttering.

"What?" he managed.

"I like your hair. Don't ever cut it shorter than it is now."

"Oh." He grinned like an idiot, and didn't care. "Well, I was thinking of shaving my head--"

"Do it," Methos growled, edging even closer, "and until it grows long again, I'll make you wish you've never been spawned," He lay in the curve of MacLeod's arm, hips canted and one leg hooked over MacLeod's, one arm resting across his belly and chest, fingers curled lightly over a nipple.

MacLeod was suddenly breathless. Over the centuries, his male lovers had been few and never casual affairs, and now he found himself relishing the unfamiliar-familiar weight of this man's body pressed along his. Had Methos always been the centre of his world, not clearly recognised until now?

Methos. Exaltation grew in him, and he tightened his embrace. Methos, who was snickering in triumphant delight.
"You planned this," MacLeod remembered. "When?"

"Questions, questions. March 6th 1995, only I shelved it for a while. Can't you think of anything else to do with your mouth?"

MacLeod considered that, then slowly rolled over to lie between Methos' spread legs, his weight braced on his elbows. "Do you have any suggestions?" he drawled, and watched the hazel eyes darken as the pupils expanded, long eyes, deep-set between the curve of the eyebrow and the high cheekbones. He could drown in those changing moss-agate depths. No, swim like a selkie in its element.

"I could write you a list," Methos whispered huskily, "only it would take you a long time to work through it."

"I can live with that," MacLeod murmured. He traced the line of the proud nose, the cheekbone and jaw, of the sharply sculpted upper lip and the fullness of the lower. Not a classically handsome face, but endlessly fascinating. "Besides, I haven't done this with a man very often." It was partially teasing, and wholly the truth. He was abruptly aware of the vast stretch of time that separated them, of his own limited experience in this particular area. "I'll need plenty of practice."

"Oh, good...."

"Methos," he said.

Hands were busy releasing the silver clasp, and combing his hair loose. "Mmmm?"

"You gave Kronos a thousand years."

"So?"

"I want two."

"Years?"

"Two thousand, minimum."

He heard Methos' breath catch in his throat. "They're yours," Methos said. "Stop wasting them," and used his double handful of hair to tug MacLeod down into a kiss.

Tongues touched and glided together, tasted, explored. Breath was shared on a word, a name, and arousal surged between them with the inevitable rhythm of the nearby sea. This wasn't the strange merging of identities that had happened the first time they'd made love. It was somehow more intimate; this time MacLeod knew exactly where he ended and his lover began. At the same time he was aware of Methos' growing pleasure and knew that with every touch, every caress, he could play it like an instrument to bring his lover to a shattering climax. While all the time the resonances of their shared quickenings coiled through their bodies, a multi-harmonic that both joined them as one and yet preserved their individual uniqueness. No wildfire netted around them this time, but the potential was there. He had never before known the kind of closeness he had found this night, wanted never to lose it. Never to lose Methos.

MacLeod trailed a web of kisses across Methos' jaw-line and down his throat, finishing with a gentle nip of teeth on the hot skin above the leaping pulse that won him a gasp and a moan. He remembered the feel of Methos' teeth at his own throat and the heat pooled hotter in his groin.

Slowly he worked his way along a collarbone, mouth and tongue savouring the salt tang of sweat.
Methos tugged his hair, trying to urge him lower, but he refused to be hurried. He licked down Methos' breastbone, lipped at the small triangle of fine hair between his pectorals, then moved to home in on a nipple that was already a hard flushed knot, and suckled it into his mouth. The moan became a whimper and the lean body shuddered beneath him, undulating in a slow glide of sweat and semen-lubricated skin on skin that pressed their erections together and came close to tipping MacLeod over the edge.

"Keep still," he pleaded in a whisper. "You're driving me crazy."

Methos made a strange sound deep in his throat. "What do you think you're doing to me?" he wheezed. "God, Duncan…."

MacLeod gave a breathless chuckle, and moved lower, mouth and tongue exploring the narrow line of hair that descended from Methos' navel and tasted the different salt of his own earlier climax. He raised his head to take Methos' lips and tongue, to share the flavor. "Then we'll be crazy together," he breathed into the hungry mouth. He kissed his way back down Methos' body, the drift of his hair over sensitized skin an added caress. He lingered briefly at Methos' navel, but his goal was waiting for him, the engorged and seeping cock that lay on Methos' belly, throbbing with each shaking breath.

Slowly, carefully, MacLeod placed his mouth on the translucent skin at the junction of abdomen and thigh, where the blood vessels lay blue just below the surface. His fingers stroked lightly up the inside of his lover's thigh to cup the velvety testicles, and Methos' breath sobbed in his throat. His hands tangled in MacLeod's hair, urging him on, and MacLeod gave in to his own need as well as Methos'.

With a murmur of pleasure he drew the head of Methos' cock into his mouth, using his greater weight to control the instinctive upward thrust of the man's hips. He teased the slit with the tip of his tongue, tasting the uniqueness of Methos, relishing him, then took more of him past his lips.

Methos' body arched and he cried out, balancing on the blade-edge of climax. MacLeod suckled strongly, and Methos' hips jerked.

"Duncan," he moaned, the vowels drawn long. MacLeod sucked again and he came, the shared pleasure surging through them both. MacLeod drank all he had to give, then slowly released the softening cock, kissing it as it lay across Methos' stomach. Then he slid up to kiss the panting mouth, let Methos' tongue dip deep into his mouth to taste Methos' own essence.

MacLeod's need was a burning ache in his genitals. He groped for and found the tube of lubricant. "Methos," he whispered against his lover's lips.

'Mmmm, yesss. Fill me….'

He wasn't sure if it was spoken or a thought, but it was the only coherent response he got, that and the languorous flex and spread of long legs.

The gel was cold on his heated flesh, cold on his fingers when he eased them into Methos' body. There was no protest; the muscles were relaxed, ready for him. Methos was kissing him, mouth blindly moving over his face and neck, and then his legs wrapped themselves around MacLeod's torso. There was no time for any more preparation, nor any need. His straining cock sheathed itself in Methos as surely and naturally as his katana into its scabbard, and his own climax was moments away. Two deep thrusts were all it took and he was dissolving in pulsing fire, gasping Methos' name.
Gradually their heartbeats and breathing returned to normal, and reluctantly MacLeod eased out of Methos' body to lie at his side.

"Mmmm," Methos purred again, stretching against him. "For someone who hasn't had much same-sex experience, you show a hell of a lot of natural talent."

"You inspire me," he said huskily, and chuckled. "What does Darius' quickening research have to say about what we have now?"

" Haven't a clue. I doubt he ever explored this far. Would be good to know what he did find out though," he added thoughtfully. "I've never heard of quickenings being exchanged like ours. Or sealed like ours."

"Mmmm," from MacLeod this time.

Methos' silent laughter was a warm caress of breath over his skin. "We're still going to argue," he murmured. "You know that. Don't you?"

MacLeod nodded. "You'll nag. Irritate the hell out of me. Disappear for months on end. Freeload."

"Dead right. Just like always. You'll sulk, go hunting windmills despite my better judgment, get involved with Amanda's impossible schemes, break your heart over things you can't prevent regardless of what I say. None of it will make a difference between us, won't mean a thing."

"I know. This is real." He moved his hand from Methos' side to rest on the long fingers curled on his own chest above the cool incandescence that was Methos' gift to him. "I'm in love with you."

"I know." A smug acknowledgement, but underneath it was the same awed wonder that lived in MacLeod. Methos didn't have to say the words; MacLeod knew he felt the same way. Sealed as they were, there was nothing hidden between them. No matter how many miles might separate them, neither would ever be alone again. "Though I doubt if I'll be taking off any time soon, or staying away for very long. A day or so. Maybe. I'd already decided that, before our unexpected bonus." MacLeod knew it. The exasperated determination to claim him was there in the Covenant between them, and beneath it was the rending grief that had been born when Methos had thought him dead. "You are mine." The words came over the link as well, resonating in his bones and his quickening. "I might share you with someone else." The image of Amanda drifted between them. "But you belong to me."

"Autocrat," he murmured.

"And you're not? Pot and kettle, MacLeod."

He chuckled, then fell silent. Beyond the drapes, dawn wasn't many hours away. He sighed regretfully. "I have to go."

"I know."

"Melissa Stone."

"Yes, and?"

"We let her know where I am. She doesn't know you're here to cover my back. She comes after me, we have her at the time and place we choose."

"MacLeod, that is not a plan. This woman likes sniper rifles and she has her own agenda."
"I'll wear a Kevlar vest."

"Great. That'll be really effective when she drills you between the eyes. If she chooses the right ammo, she won't need to take a blade to your neck, she can blow it off your shoulders with one bullet."

"All the trouble she's going to, I don't think she's after a distant kill. She'll want me to know who's killing me and why."

Methos swore in fluent something-or-other, and MacLeod hid a grin. He'd won.

"Okay." Methos snarled. "I'll go along with that, up to a point. As soon as I see this bitch, she is dead, MacLeod, and don't give me any bleeding heart crap. I don't give a fuck who she is or why she's doing it--she's dead meat."

"'Manda will be pissed," MacLeod said mildly, hands soothing over tense shoulders.

"She'll get over it."

Reluctantly they separated, MacLeod to gather up his scattered clothes and head for the bathroom and the shower, Methos to heat more water for coffee neither of them really wanted.

"I'll meet you on the terrace at the seaward side of the house, midday," MacLeod said as he came out of the bathroom fully dressed, tying back damp hair in an untidy tail. "The tide will be on the way out so I doubt we'll have any visitors from the sea."

Methos nodded. "I'll be there. MacLeod, take care. Melissa Stone and this Watcher of yours are loose cannons, unpredictable. If he is working with her, he'll have told her where you are. I know we're immortal and only one thing is going to permanently finish us, but your hide is precious to me and no one is allowed to damage it. Except me. Understood?"

"Understood," MacLeod said gravely. That blade cut both ways, and before long, Methos would have that fact pointed out in no uncertain terms.

"Good. There's one more thing," Methos went on, a laughing glint in his eyes. "Duncan…." It was a throaty growl, and his given name on Methos' lips was more potent that he would have believed possible, igniting an instantaneous desire. He reached for his naked lover, needing the lithe strength of him in his arms. "Oh, yes," Methos murmured, stepping into his embrace and settling against him. "I'm going to have to be careful about saying Duncan in public." He sounded very pleased with himself. "Now go, or you'll still be here this time tomorrow, because I have about as much will-power as you do at the moment."

"There's a name for you," MacLeod growled.

"Yup. Begins with cock and ends with tease." Methos chuckled and kissed him. "You know damn well I'm tormenting myself as well as you. Get out of here."

MacLeod sighed and released him.

Leaving was difficult. MacLeod spread his quickening as thin as he could, extending his circle of Presence to maintain that subtle link with Methos. Until, one step away from his car, he stopped, knowing that when he moved forward, the contact would be broken.

'I love you.' He sent the thought through their shared quickenings, felt the cool silk embrace that acknowledged and reciprocated, and took the last step.
Invisible fingertips touched, clung and parted, leaving him not quite alone. Methos was still with him, an ephemeral awareness in his soul that coiled with his own quickening. They were yin and yang, fire and ice. Necessary opposites.

The whys and wherefores could wait to be talked out another time, for now it was enough that they were together.

###

Halfway to the farmhouse, a word popped up in MacLeod's head. Ignifer. What the hell was an Ignifer?

###

The place felt different, Carston discovered as he eased open the terrace doors and stepped inside. Warm, without that stale, closed-in smell, and--different. For some reason it put his hackles up.

All the shutters were open, so he didn't turn on any of the lights, just used the diffused beam of his torch to make sure he didn't break his neck on the twisting staircase. Faint though the light was, it showed him the extent of the redecoration. The quietness and the dry warmth of the air told its own story as well, and he wouldn't have needed the reports from his spies to tell him double-glazing and new central-heating had been put in.

Serious money had indeed been spent on the house, Carston acknowledged. Maybe he should let Anders loose with a sledgehammer.

Carston frowned. On the other hand, Anders needed to be reined back. His unauthorized attack on the two Bouvins could have had serious repercussions, especially if he had seriously injured them. However, the lack of said repercussions was informative, and strengthened his growing conviction that Gervais Dubosc had an agenda of his own.

Still frowning, Carston took the stairs down to the ground floor. The washroom had been enlarged to take in a shower as well, while the laundry room had been refitted with appliances that looked to have been designed by the special effects crew on a TV space opera, and the huge cavern of the double garage now had shelving and workbenches. The open space that had been the studio-cum-workshop raised his eyebrows.

He stopped on the threshold. An elusive scent teased his nostrils and it took a moment for him to identify. Something sweetly resinous, like pine or cedar. The small patch of torchlight glowed on the new floor. He crouched and ran his fingers over the satin smoothness. It would burn well, Carston decided, smiling. When he slipped his last customer through, the House of the Lanterns would light up the Cap for miles around. They'd see the conflagration from Surtainville to Diélette.

He took out his cell phone and keyed in a number. "Patric," he said, "I don't care if he's still throwing up, bring Istvanovich. His belly will settle once he's ashore. The garage and washroom are the only places we can use. Make sure he doesn't put on any lights, and don't leave any sign at all that anyone's been here. That means no smoking." He didn't wait for a reply, but ended that call
and made another. "Marco, it's on. Be at the front gate of the Lanterns at 0400 hours with the payment in full."
"Duncan!" The door bounced on its hinges under Gaspard's hammering. "Come on, wake up! Hungover or not, Grand-mère has breakfast waiting!"

MacLeod turned over, one out-flung arm registering he was alone in the big old-fashioned bed. Of course he was alone; Methos was in Surtainville. Methos. His lover.

In the cold light of a new day, how did he feel about that? The answer wasn't complex. Euphoric, more alive than he'd felt for over a decade, and he didn’t doubt the reality of what had passed between them.

But more than a physical union had happened, and for that he had no explanation or answer.

To be able to recognise a quickening was unheard of as far as MacLeod knew, but he'd been living with it long enough to be at ease with it. To share, to exchange, was a concept that sent his mind reeling. At the time it had seemed so right and natural. Now the questions gathered in droves. How had it happened? Why? Surely it wasn't unique to them. Who else had experienced it?

What were the implications, for themselves and for immortals in general? How could it be possible for even a minute part of an immortal's vital life essence to be given to another and not be completely absorbed, to still retain its own unique integrity? Yet the proof that it did glowed within him; an intense spark of cool diamond-fire that pulsed in rhythm with his own heartbeat. When Carston and Stone had been dealt with, he and Methos would have plenty of time to find some answers.

Methos. He recalled all that Methos had told him, examined it and felt again the echo of anger and hunger for revenge that had lived in the ancient immortal's memories. Never forgotten, never forgiven. Death was relentless. It was all there in the man's quickening: enduring ice and lethal blades.

Death. The rider on the pale horse. A man who had raped and slaughtered across three continents for over a thousand years, conscienceless, amoral. MacLeod frowned. If he had been raised the same way, would he have been any different? It was easy to say, yes, of course he'd have been different, would never cut such a bloody swathe of terror, nor for so long. It wasn’t so easy to convince himself it was the truth.

It was, however, all part of the Methos package. Add devious, contrary, aggravating, intriguing, unpredictable; mix in a convoluted loyalty, well-hidden sensuality, a love of knowledge for its own sake, an insatiably enquiring mind, and that was only scratching the surface of the five-thousand-year-old enigma. That package had been offered and accepted.

MacLeod accepted it again in the chill grey light of dawn, and was at peace.

He stretched every muscle, luxuriating in the simple act, and for a moment he visualized waking in the mornings at Methos' side.

An old grief twisted in his heart. In four hundred years, no one had shared his life as completely as Tessa had. She was a true partner in all things: strong, independent, generous and loving, she had equaled him in many ways, bettered him in others, and in that wonderful soaring talent of hers, gone far above him. They had laughed and teased and squabbled and loved and had needed no one but each other. Could he be on the verge of finding that with Methos? More to the point, could a
five thousand year old man, who after centuries of reiving with Kronos, had openly stated he had never committed himself to an immortal, find that with him and be content?

Then he rediscovered the gift deep in his heart and smiled. Kronos wasn’t part of the equation. Maybe there was a first time for everything, even when you're five thousand plus years old.

"Duncan? Are you sober? Alive?"

"Yes and yes," he called. Alive he certainly was. Sober, probably not and that had nothing to do with mere alcohol.

###

"So," said Margot, as MacLeod came into the kitchen, "did your M'sieur Dawson send a message with M'sieur Pierson?"

"Yes, kind of." He knew he'd face a questioning that might rival the Spanish Inquisition if his answers weren't good enough. "He's had work problems, couldn't get back to me."

"And Amanda?"

MacLeod chuckled. "She's fine."

"When are they coming to visit?"

"I don't know. As soon as they can."

"And have they forgiven you for taking so long to contact them?"

"I--think so."

She studied him, dark eyes intent, seeing, perhaps, more than he'd wish right now. MacLeod took his place at the table and began to butter some croissants.

"Hmph." Margot poured coffee for him. "You'd better bring M'sieur Pierson to dinner one evening. How's your knee?"

"Thank you." MacLeod smiled at her, though a sudden uncertainty began in his stomach. Would she guess they were lovers? He didn't have any illusions as to her reactions if, or when, she discovered it. This was rural Normandy, not the heart of cosmopolitan Paris. Whether he'd be able to stay when Methos' place in his life became common knowledge was a moot point. Neither did he want to live a lie as far as his lover was concerned. But he'd cross that bridge when he came to it. "I'll tell him. My knee's fine. Still strapped, but it doesn't hurt."

"Your ribs?"

"No problem."

"Hmph." Then she smiled and touched his hair in a brief caress. "Good," she said. "He's taken a great weight from you. Your friends will be welcome here."
MacLeod parked his Citroen by Le Sémaphore. Several other cars were there, Methos' black Renault among them. He smiled and strolled along the coastal path towards The Lanterns. As he went, MacLeod spread out his quickening, eager for the first brush of Methos' Presence. It came before he was anywhere near the boundary wall, a touch as tangible as a caress, a rich harmonic that resonated in perfect pitch with his own. There was no jarring, no discomfort to the point of pain, no blades. Oh, they were there, but he was within their circle, as he was within the chill barricades, protected by both.

Then he saw the image of his quickening from Methos' perception: lying on velvet before a banked fire, warm and cherished and defended by the tall shield and sheathed sword that stood together in the firelight. That shield and its embossed design were familiar, though it had nothing to do with Scotland, nor the shield on the Lantern’s front door. For a moment, he couldn’t place it. Then he chased it down. Shields like that had been in the restored frescos in Knossos, on Crete.

MacLeod smiled, then chuckled. Sword and shield, blades and barricades, each guarded the other.

He unlocked the front door and went in, feeling the same sense of satisfaction it had given him the first time he’d done it. He trotted up the spiral staircase by the study and opened the terrace doors. Methos was waiting, leaning on the wrought-iron balustrade and grinning at him with predatory delight.

"Hello," Methos drawled. "Duncan…." 

"Hi," he said, suddenly breathless, and walked into a hard embrace. But the kiss they shared was a gentle affirmation of what they had become.

They parted reluctantly. "I like the view from up here," Methos said, "though I doubt it'd be as pleasant with a winter gale howling out of the west."

"Oh, I don't know. Wild weather can be exhilarating."


"You've gotten soft in your old age," MacLeod said, grinning. "Have you looked inside yet?"

"No, I waited for you. It's your house, after all."

"Mi casa, et cetera," he said quietly. "Come on." He opened the double doors wide and ushered Methos onto the gallery. Up here," he went on, heading left, "is the main bedroom. It has doors opening onto the terrace, and its own skylight. Through there are dressing rooms off to left and right and then the en suite bathroom."

He waited while Methos prowled, giving each place the minute inspection of a tomcat checking territory.

"Nice," Methos said, an approving speculation in his voice that promised all kinds of other explorations at a later date. He stood where the bed would be, facing the glass doors, and smirked. MacLeod didn't need their link to know what he was thinking, imagining, planning. "Yes. Very nice."
"Glad you like it," MacLeod drawled, keeping his voice steady with an effort, then he led the way around the gallery and opened the study door.

"Oh, good," Methos said with pleased surprise. "There's a fireplace in here. I like an open fire on a cold night." That came through their link as well, on another thread of sensual anticipation. "There's something about a fire…"

"Thought you usually spend your winters in some place tropical?" MacLeod smiled.

"I do, but every now and then I'll probably be passing by to touch base."

"Then I'll make sure the fire's burning for you," MacLeod murmured, moving closer so their shoulders touched and the contact carried the full weight of the double entendre. He built a picture in his mind; a rug before a blazing hearth, a dark, thick-piled rug that displayed the pale perfection of Methos' naked body--

"Duncan," Methos whispered. Then: "I think you'd better stop that. We haven't the time…"

"Sure about that?"

"Don't tempt me."

MacLeod laughed, and it came out a little breathless. But he moved just enough to break their contact. "I thought I'd make this a library and study," he said, "with Japanese screens to cut it off from the solarium if necessary."

"A study, yes, but not a library. All this sunlight won't be good for the books," Methos said, standing under the skylight and raising his face to the sun. "You ought to know that."

"What would you do, then?"

"Make another room the library." His eyes closed, his smile became beatific. "This is a great relaxing, chilling out kind of place. Plants. Warm. Sunlight. Out there in the solarium, a lime tree for fresh limes in your G&T…. Or lemons."

"Okay." MacLeod chuckled.

Methos' eyes snapped open. "Judging by all the work and fresh paint inside," he said, "you've poured money into this place and you haven't even begun to tackle that overgrown jungle of a garden out there. Putting that straight as well will take another small fortune. Don't tell me, let me guess; it was on the market at way over its value, and you put in an offer without a single attempt at bargaining." MacLeod grinned at him.

"Yes."

"Sucker. Come on, I want to see the rest of this white elephant."

Methos led the way down to the second floor, investigated the kitchen and dining area with its large bay window and balcony. He wandered around the huge space of the living room, passed by the front door, checked and came back to it, attention caught by the carved patterns. He let out his breath in a low whistle. "That's impressive," he said quietly.

"How much do you know about the art of the 1920's and 30's?" MacLeod asked softly. "Dominique Jinevre's La Tène stained-glass had a small but faithful following, more than half a century before the so-called Celtic revivals. That's one of Ma Dame's adaptations in wood. Her
husband, Leon De Carteret, did it. It's based on the Battersea Shield."

"I know." Methos walked to the door, as MacLeod had done when he'd first seen the carvings, he ran his fingers over the sinuous shapes in the wood, following the lines of the central roundel. "Two thousand years…. An appropriate thing to have as a door," he said. "Your Ma Dame sounds quite a lady."

"She is. I'd like you to meet her. I've been meaning to go over to St. Helier with photos of the place, but there never seemed a good time to do it, especially recently." He didn't have to mention Carston's name, or Stone's. "Think I'll post them first chance I get, and when all this is finished, we can go over to see her. She's nearly a hundred years old and she's lace over porcelain and tempered steel. The kind of woman Tessa might have been if she'd lived that long."

The name hung between them, heavy with the pain of a wound never truly healed. Methos sighed and went to him, wrapped his arms around him and hugged him close. He didn't speak, didn't have to. MacLeod held him convulsively tight.

"If I lose you--" he began.

"You won't," Methos said quietly. "You can't, any more than I can lose you. Our quickenings are shared and Sealed, Duncan."

"And if one of us loses his head, what happens?"

"Our quickenings are shared and Sealed," Methos said again. "If it happens, then whoever takes that head can't get the quickening. Surely it would come to whichever of us is alive? We will not be parted, Duncan." He made it a vow, enforcing it with mind as well as voice. "I won't permit it. You are mine, and no one is going to have the smallest part of you, in life or in death. Do you hear me? Do you understand?"

MacLeod nodded. Another time, perhaps he might resent the possessiveness, but not now. "Shared and Sealed," he said. He didn't suggest that the death of one might mean the death of the other, he didn't have to; Methos picked up the thought and his arms tightened around MacLeod's ribs.

For a timeless while they stood locked together in the pool of sunlight that streamed down from the ceiling. Then Methos slowly released him and stepped away. "When this is over," he said, "we can go to my apartment in Paris or my house in London. In both places I have freezers full of food, racks of wine. We can lock the doors, take the phone off the hook and not get out of bed for a month."

MacLeod drew in a deep breath, let it out in a sigh and laughed quietly. "Sounds good to me," he said.

There were only two rooms left to see on the second floor; one was going to be the guest bedroom, MacLeod announced, while the other was a bathroom. It was tiled mostly in green with some white, and had a sunken pool of about four yards by three for a bath that widened Methos' eyes. "Oh, yes," Methos whispered. "This is positively, decadently Roman! I like it!"

"Thought perhaps you might." MacLeod grinned. "I've had the power-shower put in, and I'm still thinking that maybe a jacuzzi could go in over there."

"I like the way you think." Methos studied MacLeod, head to one side, eyes narrowed. "You can afford all this, can't you?"

"A dozen times over, and then some."
"Just making sure. What's downstairs?"

"Dojo, garages, store-rooms, laundry room."

"Dojo." He snickered. "I knew there was something missing. Lead on, MacSucker."

But at the door of the dojo, he slipped off shoes and socks and gave a brief formal bow, something he'd never done in the dojo in Seacouver. Then he stepped barefoot onto the red cedar floor. In the centre of the room he stopped, turned slowly to face the four quarters in turn, a smile spreading across his face.

"What?" MacLeod demanded. Nothing was coming through their connection except a deep and abiding satisfaction. Methos chuckled.

"You can smell it," he whispered. "The cedar. Like incense." Then he focussed on MacLeod again. "You have quite a home here," he said. "When do you move in?"

"Next weekend. Will you still be here?"

"Probably."

"Good. Then you should have these." He took the spare set of keys from his pocket and held them out. "My home is your home."

"And mine is yours," Methos said quietly, accepting the keys. He held them in his fist, tight enough for the knuckles to whiten, and MacLeod knew exactly how much the gift meant to him. "So I get to plan the housewarming orgy, yes?" he added with a lightness at odds with the deep emotion inside.

"If you want," MacLeod said, smiling. "Though maybe it ought to wait until the Carston and Stone affairs are wound up. By then Evans should be out of our hair."

"Hm. I'd forgotten about him." Methos sighed. "If he's a halfway decent enough Watcher to recognise you, then there's a chance he'll recognise Adam Pierson."

"Maybe Joe could get him off my back, pull some Watcher strings."

"Not any more," Methos said. He sat on the dojo's threshold and put his socks and shoes back on. "He's in Research, remember, and I'll bet good money Steve Mitchell is watching him like a hawk. We'll have to do this without Joe."

"Then we concentrate on Stone first. We've already agreed I get myself back on the database and draw her here." Methos scowled, but said nothing. "If Evans hasn't already done it."

"He hasn't, as of this morning. I checked before I came here."

"Why hasn't he?" MacLeod frowned. "What the hell is he playing at?"

"We'll get round to him," Methos said, standing up and dusting off his backside. "Once Stone's out of circulation, we're clear to take on Carston. When he's sorted, it's Evans' turn."

By unspoken agreement, they went back up to the terrace and leaned on the balustrade, looking down into the small bay. At its mouth, tumbled rocks jutted above the waves, dark with weed. There was a channel of deeper water, but more rocks showed as shadows not that far beneath the surface.
"I suppose," Methos said with some resignation, "You'll be getting a boat of your own."

"I'm thinking about it," McLeod agreed.

"And it won't be a luxury berth job, either, will it?"

"Depends on what I can find with a shallow enough draft to get in here. Want to go down and take a closer look?"

"Sand, rocks, cold water," Methos grumbled. "What's to see?" But he was right on MacLeod's heels as he started down the spiral steps to the beach, some fifty feet below.

For all the delicacy of its La Tène decoration, the stair was solidly anchored to the granite. Despite its age and the constant assault of sea spray and weather, very little corrosion showed, even at the base where spring tides would bring the waves crashing right up to the cliff.

Down in the bay, the air was still. Huge boulders lay half-buried in the sand that formed a borderland between the rock face and the water. The bay itself was almost a perfect circle about forty yards in diameter, broken by the entrance to the open sea, barely eleven yards wide.

"I can see why you and Carston would both want this," Methos said quietly.

"Think you could stand to spend some time here?" MacLeod asked. Real concern lay under the gentle teasing in his voice.

Methos chuckled and perched on a rock, hands in his pockets. "With the right inducements," he drawled. "I might even consider letting you persuade me into a boat. On a very warm day," he added.

MacLeod smiled and sat beside him. Both of them leaned a little so that their shoulders touched. Overhead a few gulls wheeled, their mewling cries counterpoint to the susurration of the ebbing tide, and a sense of peace filled the small bay.

"Methos," MacLeod said after a while, "what's an Ignifer?"

"How's your Latin?"

"It means Fire-bearer. But does it mean more than that?"

"Yes," Methos said slowly. "It's something the Watchers don't seem to have picked up on, for which we can be grateful. As far as I know, Darius is the only one who has made any kind of a study of it. He started off linking it in with his quickening research, but I don't know how far he got with it. For one thing, it's a pretty rare phenomenon, and it's hard to investigate something when you yourself are the only example you can find for centuries on end." He was silent for a while, contemplating the sea, a small smile on his mouth.

"He'd found some scraps of old accounts of it, Persian, I think," he continued. "So he came up with the label. Ignifer. He also discovered there seemed to be two kinds, so he named them as well, only this time he bastardized the Latin. He was a Datorigni."

"There's no such word." MacLeod frowned.

"I told you, it's bastardized. Break it down."

"Okay. Dator…. Giver. And igni is fire, so it means Fire-Giver?"
Methos nodded. "Datorigni give, MacLeod. According to Darius, they can't help themselves. Someone comes to them needing and they give. Understanding, protection, comfort, love, solace, healing, whatever's needed. Darius was the strongest I've ever known. He was an oasis in a desert, a safe harbor in a storm. Within the circle of his quickening, you knew you were safe, loved, that you could lie down and rest, and heal...." MacLeod said nothing. He didn't need their link to know that Methos spoke from experience, and he had his own memories of Darius that confirmed every word. "Does any of this sound familiar?" Methos finished, raising an ironic eyebrow.

"What do you mean?" MacLeod demanded, voice uncertain. "You think I might be a Datorigni?"

Methos nodded. "I think that's what Darius saw in you. I don't know a lot about Ignifers," he went on, "only what he'd told me at the time. He thought it was the same as any other talent, and could be improved with practice up to the level of the individual's power potential."

"I'm not like Darius," MacLeod said, a deep conviction in his voice. "No way. You never followed this up?" he went on incredulously. "This Ignifer deal?"

"No," Methos said with an impatient snap. "I had other things going on in my life. Like staying attached to my head. Besides, it was Darius' baby, and he was far better placed than me to research it." Which was true, as was the fact the whole show had smacked too much of explosive danger, and he'd preferred to keep a distance.

Every so often Darius had managed to coerce him into taking part in some of the experiments, but they were few and far between. "There's more. Remember Darius' Balance Theory? He discovered a long time ago that the Ignifers fitted the same pattern. As well as Datorigni there are Vorarigni. From the verb vorare, to devour. For every Darius there was a Kronos."

A brief silence grew between them. "What was Byron?" MacLeod asked quietly.

"I didn't think you'd've forgotten about him," Methos said with a wry smile. "I'm not sure. Maybe he was a flawed Datorigni. He fed off the adulation of his fans, needed them, no question. That's something else Darius said about Ignifers; they don't handle isolation very well. They have to have people around them, be it friends, companions, lovers, or--" He broke off with a shrug. "However you want to define what the other Horsemen were to Kronos. Maybe Kell was a Vorarigni as well, it would fit with that little group of psychos he'd gathered around him."

"Kol'Tec," MacLeod said. "He was a Datorigni?"

Methos shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. Or something else entirely."

MacLeod didn't speak. It sounded improbable, a fantasy--but so had Ahriman in the cold light of day. And some immortals did have talents that were borderline Twilight Zone. Yet despite all the positive words Methos had hung around the title of Datorigni, he found it oddly unpleasant. "You are vampires," Rees Evans had said. "Every one of you is a parasite." Long ago he had come to terms with what it meant to be an immortal, or he'd assumed he had. The thought he was feeding off the love and friendship of those around him was sickening, repellent.

"How long have you known what I might be?" he asked huskily. Methos moved closer, dropped an arm across his shoulders.

"Not long," he admitted. "At Bordeaux Cassandra told me and I didn't believe her. Mind you, I'm pretty damn certain she didn't know what she was talking about. I think she'd picked up that I had a bit of your quickening, she knew Kronos was a Vorarigni and embroidered the rest to suit her own slant on things. Maybe she was in on Darius' research for a while, long enough to work out what
"Kronos was, at least." His arm tightened around MacLeod, turning him a little so Methos could look into his eyes.

"Duncan, stop flaying yourself," he said. "It isn't the horror story you're making of it. Yes, you absorb the love from those you love--and you give it all back. Lovers, friends, mortals, immortals, it makes no difference. But I swear to you, you can't make someone feel what isn't already there. It's not foolproof, either. Love can turn to hate in some people, and then there's a major problem. Your love feeds their hate and it can get very messy." He didn't mention Kate, but her face was there in both their minds. "The gift doesn't seem as strong in you, compared to Darius, but it's there. Enough to enrich the lives of those you love." A rueful smile grew as he traced the frown-lines on MacLeod's brow. "Joe saw it before I did. He said it wasn't just your upbringing with you, this impulse to protect. He said it was in your genes. He was right. Darius found it sometimes forms a kind of tenuous link as well, doubly strong when the sexual element is added to the mix. And no, it is nothing like the Seal between us," he said, answering the unspoken question. "That is unique."

"I felt Lucas Desiree die," MacLeod whispered. "I felt Connor in Sanctuary when Kell--and Tessa--" He stopped, his voice breaking on her name, unable to go on.

"I rest my case," Methos said quietly. "Or rather, I rest Darius' case."

Anger stung him; at Methos, Darius, himself-- "Why didn't you tell me? He--you should have told me!"

"Because I didn't believe Cassandra. She'd implied you were a Vorarigni, I knew for sure you weren't and didn't think to look further. I had a small part of your quickening and that was enough for me. Then you were reported dead." Remembered anguish bled through the link and MacLeod forgot his own tangled emotions and self-disgust. He turned, and his arms closed around the lean body, holding him close. "When I knew you weren't," Methos went on, voice muffled by MacLeod's shoulder, "I started thinking, remembering, and the pieces fell into place. By then I'd already decided you needed a Keeper and that was going to be me. The major problem there was that you, of course, had long since buggered off and no one knew where you were. Until you wrote to Joe."

"And you intercepted the letter. Did you know how sick he was?"

Methos met the accusation in his gaze with an expressionless face, and no remorse at all came through their link. "Yes," he said. "Joe was stable and I wanted you to myself for a while. That seemed like the best way to make sure I did." He paused and shrugged. "Joe will not be happy with me when he finds out."

"Yeah, well, he'll have something juicy to put in the Chronicles, though," MacLeod said, a slight edge to his voice. But this was Methos, who wrote the book on ruthless. He tightened his embrace and Methos gave a small sigh.

"He might not." Methos turned his face into MacLeod's neck. "You'd be surprised how circumspect Joe is with his reports. But you want to tell him, don't you?"

MacLeod didn't answer directly. "Do you want to keep this--us--secret?" he said into Methos' hair.

"I'd certainly like to keep the Watchers out of our bedroom." Methos straightened and tilted his head a little to look him in the eyes. "Other than that, I don't give a damn."

That was the truth, MacLeod knew from the bond. Methos was totally indifferent to the opinions of others. His only benchmark was how any condemnation by friends might affect MacLeod. "I
suppose you want to tell the Dubosc tribe,” Methos said.

"Yes. They need to know if we're going to spend any time in the area. I love you and I'm not going to pretend otherwise."

"And if they can't handle it?"

MacLeod shrugged. "I sell the house and move in with you. Joe--"

"He's your Watcher, your deal," Methos said quickly, "though I'd love to be a fly on the wall."

"Chicken!"

"True, but the eggs come in useful," he said, a chuckle in his voice, and leaned close again.

"Joe's a good friend," MacLeod said huskily. There was also Dominique de Carteret. How would she react? She was as indomitable as Margot Dubosc in her own way. Then he became aware of Methos' warm breath on his skin, and it triggered memories of the night they'd spent together, distracting him from Ignifers and lifestyle issues. Which was, he suddenly realised, what Methos intended. So, "Ignifers," he said. "If I'm one, and given that I'm no Darius, what the hell do I do with it? What's it good for?"

"Fantastic sex," Methos said immediately.

"Be serious!"

"I am!" But he smiled as he leaned back in the circle of MacLeod's arms. Then the smile faded into solemnity. "Darius thought Datorigni could put an end to the Game," he said.

"What?" MacLeod stared at him blankly. "I've heard something like that before, remember? It wasn't true then and it isn't true now!" Then he paused, frowning. "That fake Methos knew things," he said thoughtfully. "Things he couldn't have known about people, what made them tick. He was a Datorigni." It was a statement, not a question.

Methos nodded. "I'm pretty sure he was, but didn't do him much good in the long run, did it? Simply throwing away our swords never will be the answer."

"No." MacLeod sighed. "Then how?" he demanded. "For god's sake, if ever we have a realistic chance to end this madness, then I for one would grab it with both hands! But I don't see what difference they could make. The fake Methos failed, and Darius' Peace crusade shows no sign of succeeding any time soon!"

"Hey, you're preaching to the choir, here." Methos' smile widened, became almost tender. "Darius was working for the long term goal, remember, not the quick fix."

"And for every Messenger of peace, false or not, there's a William Culbraith. Being a Datorigni didn't help him. It's having a kind of empathy, but that's all, isn't it? You said they can't compel. He certainly couldn't. I still don't see what difference it could make. But if Darius thought so, then--" Hope grew in his face and voice.

"Empathy, yes, but he thought it could be a passive weapon. Think about it. The Game is all about kill or be killed. The last one left standing may well have the ultimate Prize, but he or she has taken part in genocide to get it, committed the final act of ultimate ethnic cleansing."

"Which is only one of the reasons why I don't want any part of it!"
"Hold that thought. Now, Darius believed that a Datorigni would not be capable of genocide, and so the Game would be ended—if enough Datorigni were still alive."

"But the Gathering—"

"Which one?" Methos said with a dismissive shrug. He straightened and turned in McLeod's embrace, still leaning against him. "They come and go. The latest one was the Kurgan's. Did you answer the pull? No. Neither did I, Amanda, Fitz, the Valicourts, many others. Those who did, died, until Connor answered and took his head."

"But—" and stopped. He'd been in Paris, had felt an urge to go to New York but something about that pull had set his nerves on edge. He'd stayed where he was. It had been uncomfortable, but relatively easy to do.

"You knew Darius as well as I did," Methos went on. "He was a great force for peace, and the movement he started goes on without him. The people he taught, mortal and immortal, are spread all over the world, many in positions of influence, every one of them working for that goal. And Darius was one man. Think of others like him, some on holy ground, some out there, teaching, inspiring, strengthening."

MacLeod nodded, remembering Victor Paulus. "That fits with the man I knew," he said quietly, "but I don't see how I fit."

"That depends on whether you're a Datorigni or not," Methos said with a wry smile. "That was his plan, anyway, back in the 15th century when he'd begun to look into Ignifers and discovered the differences. He'd been quietly working away at it since then. I think he had a valid point, up to a point. After all, you tell me how easy is it to kill someone you know and like?" he continued with deliberate callousness. "How easy is it to go against everything you believe in, every code of honour and trust and loyalty, and take the head of a friend? How easy is it to go against love, and take a lover's head?" MacLeod remained silent, his face gaunt with memory. "Exactly. Add to that the instinct to protect, to heal, to shelter and support, and it could well nullify the Gathering imperative. The more of us who stay alive, the less likely a Gathering becomes. They only kick in when some of us go on a killing spree and our numbers drop. The pattern's there in the Watchers' database, if you look for it. I don't know if any of them have; 'The Gathering' as in one victorious immortal overlord is something of a fixation and most of them can't see past it."

"Where are you going with this?" MacLeod demanded.

"I don't know!" Methos snapped, frustrated. He pulled free of MacLeod's embrace and stood up, started to pace the sand. "I don't have Darius' bloody research, do I? For what it's worth, I think he was wrong."

"Darius? Wrong?" MacLeod bit out the words, his anger rising.

"Wrong!" Methos cut back, "and don't glare at me as if I've committed some unforgivable sacrilege! Again! He was as human as the rest of us, with all the faults and shades of grey that go along with it. Maybe he'd fallen into the trap of believing his own legend. No one can stop the Game in its tracks, but some of us can slow it down, make sure it won't be won for a very long time."

"I'll settle for that," MacLeod said. "How?"

"We've already started," Methos said. "The de Valicourts, all the other couples we don't know about who've been together for centuries. You and me, Sealed."
"Are you saying," he said carefully, "we should start an immortal Marriage Bureau?"

Methos snorted with laughter. "No."

"Good. So the Game has to go on." He shook his head. "I don't want to believe that, but if the alternative is we're all dead but one, then there's no other choice I can see for now." There was a pause. "No one in their right mind would challenge either of us, knowing the other was there, waiting," he added thoughtfully.

"Oh, MacLeod," Methos sighed. "When will you accept the world has moved on? How many times have I told you? Most of the up-and-coming young bucks can't even spell chivalry, let alone live it. And the really old ones don't, and never did, give a flying fuck about it. The time will come when no one will bother with a challenge, they'll just go for the kill, and the values you grew up with will have been chucked into the garbage bins."

"I know," MacLeod said stubbornly. "But that doesn't mean I have to dive in there with them."

"Make sure you never forget it," Methos murmured, voice soft. "I'll be there guarding your back, your heart and your head, Duncan MacLeod. Every Don Quixote has to have his Sancho Panza. Just don't expect me to play by your rules, and don't flay me when I don't."

"I won't," MacLeod said. "I'm not a complete idiot. I'll live my life by my own rules, but I don't assume everyone else plays by the same book." Then honesty forced him to amend it. "I'll try not to," he added with a rueful shrug. "As long as you remember how much you mean to me."

"That I can never doubt," Methos said. He strolled forward and stood between MacLeod's knees, rested his hands lightly on MacLeod's shoulders, "when I feel it every time we touch, every moment our quickenings overlap. But I'll give you fair warning: remember who I was and what I am."

MacLeod nodded. "You'll need to do the same for me," he said slowly. "Who I was, what I am, we're both of us products of our times." He reached up and captured one of Methos' hands, turned his wrist and their fingers twined together. He gazed down at the narrow palm and long, clever fingers enclosed in his own broader, darker-skinned grasp. "It's possible," he went on reluctantly, "that Darius never found any answers for Ignifers, any more than he did for immortals in general."

"Not just possible, I'd say it was a certainty. We just are, MacLeod. Like the rest of humanity, all we can do is live our lives as best we can to our own internal codes. Did Darius ever tell you any different?"

"No, not really."

"Then stop chewing at it and remember that while you and I live, the Game can never be won. End of story."

MacLeod smiled, then laughed. "Or the beginning," he said. "I love you," and watched the moss- agate eyes widen and darken, the sculpted mouth soften in an answering smile.

"I know," Methos whispered, and leaned forward to claim a kiss. "We need Darius' research, whatever he wrote down about them," he went on. "I haven't a clue where he might have stored his notes, nor how much he managed to learn."

"Okay, when this mess is straightened out and we've had that month or two in bed eating your freezers empty, we start hunting for them."
"That's more like a plan," Methos agreed. "I've got another one. The first thing you do is buy a bed. A big one."

MacLeod laughed. "I'll think about it," he said, then drew him closer and kissed the hungry mouth. "I have to go."

"Those four words are fast becoming the bane of my life, d'you know that?" Methos growled. "You can make it up to me tonight. In the meantime, maybe it's about time I met these lunatics who've decided you're a long lost relative."
Methos didn't return to Surtainville with MacLeod. "I'll come to the boatyard later," he said, and stood at the front door to watch him out of sight. Then he turned back into the house. He wandered through the rooms again, taking his time, letting the feel of the place soak into him, ease into his bones and settle there. Even bare of furniture it was a home, a haven, and he knew how much it would cost MacLeod to give it up if this Dubosc-Bouvin clan wouldn't accept their relationship. He also knew that MacLeod wouldn't hesitate, nor regret the loss. When it came down to it, 'home' was together, no matter where.

Methos gave a self-mocking hoot. "I should write greetings cards." His voice echoed around the living room and he grinned. "Or I'm finally getting sentimental." The bunch of keys was still held tight in his fist, an outward sign of the pact between them. Quickenings shared and Sealed.

Because of who and what he was, Methos wondered how long it would be before the closeness of that sharing became irksome. He'd never had anyone in his head in quite the same way; the awareness that followed a beheading didn't even come close to this telempathy they'd acquired. But it felt right, a natural progression. It wasn't as if he'd felt incomplete before Duncan MacLeod had come into his life, more like now he was--augmented, somehow. That needed to be explored, fully understood, but Methos was in no hurry.

He returned to the dojo and leaned against the doorframe. It didn't take a lot of imagination to visualize MacLeod there, moving through his katas, wearing only loose sweatpants and a gloss of perspiration.

He enjoyed the pleasant daydream for a while, then Methos carried on to the garage, ran fingertips along the edge of the workbench. He wasn't much for mechanical tinkering himself, but maybe MacLeod was. The barge didn't count; that had been a necessity to keep the bloody antique river-worthy. There were, after all, some things he didn't know about this man. Yet.

The laundry room with its state of the art equipment got another once-over, then the washroom and the new sensible-sized shower stall, the glass gleaming, etched like water flowing: a static waterfall. Handy after sweaty work in the dojo or garage, and Methos' smile widened. The smile became a frown. The hand basin had a faint scum-line around it and there was a small dried-up splat of toothpaste near the plughole. Methos stared at it, scowl darkening. Paranoia had kept him alive for a very long time. "Tides," he said aloud. "When was high tide last night?" The house didn't answer, of course, but there was one person who'd know.

Melissa Stone was bad enough, adding Jack Carston to the mix was insult to injury. Methos' usual response to heightened danger was no longer an option, and he didn't begrudge it. Nor was it only the threat to MacLeod that had cancelled it out. Carston, and he didn't doubt the man was behind the toothpaste, if only indirectly, had desecrated the house, their house, and Methos took exception to that. In an ideal world, Henri Pasquier's ultimatum should have been enough. He wasn't surprised it had failed.

###

On the way to Surtainville and the boatyard, Methos reviewed all MacLeod had told him about
Carston and his operations. Most of it had come courtesy of Pasquier, and Methos had been frankly amazed that MacLeod had been prepared to follow the dead man’s and his family’s wish to let things slide. Darius would have been proud.

Methos left his car in his hotel’s parking lot, and walked briskly toward the boatyard. As he crossed the road, MacLeod’s Presence welcomed him, wrapped him in velvet, and Methos was smiling as he passed through the gates.

He headed straight for the small office, little more than a shack on the edge of the yard, knowing that was where he'd find MacLeod.

He opened the door and went in. MacLeod sat perched on a chair, his back to a computer screen, waiting for him. Another man, dark, heavy-set and powerful, was at the larger desk, surrounded by neat piles of invoices.

"What's happened?" MacLeod demanded, and Methos twitched an eyebrow at him, smiled sweetly and ignored him. "Hi," he said to the man who had to be Gervais Dubosc. "I'm Adam Pierson, a friend of MacLeod's come visiting."

"Gervais Dubosc," the man said, his own smile growing, and they shook hands solemnly.

The door opened and Methos glanced round as two men drifted in, casual and obviously prepared for mayhem should the stranger prove hostile. The taller of the two was undoubtedly Matthieu Bouvin; his likeness to MacLeod was striking. Which meant the other man, who also shared a family resemblance, was almost certainly Jean-Michel.

In a major breach of common politeness, MacLeod didn’t perform introductions. "What happened?" he demanded again, his impatience and concern coming through their link.

"Toothpaste," Methos answered crisply. "In the hand-basin of the ground floor washroom, a small bit, fresh enough not to flake off when I poked it. I went over the place with a fine-tooth comb, but short of a forensic sweep, I couldn't prove to a judge how many were there last night. But at least one person was."

"Carston?" Matthieu said blankly. "But, the ultimatum. Surely he wouldn't dare?"

"The bastard!" Jean-Michel exploded. "Of course he would! He's still using the place!"

"M'sieur Pierson," Gervais said over him, "has Duncan told you about our local problems?"

"Yes."

"Are you with us?" MacLeod asked.

"Of course and we've already had this discussion," Methos snapped, irked that the idiot had the nerve to ask. To his satisfaction, MacLeod's color rose a little. "When was high tide last night?"

"0324 hours," Gervais said. "The Halcyon. Was she in the area? I didn't see her."

"Ah, but," said Jean-Michel, "were you looking? There was a boat anchored off-shore last night. I saw the riding-lights when I came out of Le Séaphore round about eleven-thirty, but I couldn't tell you if it was her or not, and the fog was rolling in."

"We start looking for her," Gervais said. "As of now, round the clock. Matthieu, give Yves and Thierry a yell. Duncan," he went on as Matthieu stuck his head out of the door and bellowed the
names, "maybe you should think about moving into the Lanterns today, make sure there's someone there all the time. Though I'd sooner trap him than prevent him." And got a shout of agreement from the Bouvin brothers, as well as a nod from MacLeod.

"I can help there," Methos said, irritation replaced by amusement. Gervais Dubosc was obviously not one to take a back seat, and he found it interesting that MacLeod was happy to let him take the lead. Well, the man was the boss, paid the wages. "You guys carry on as normal, like nothing has happened, and I'll take the day shift on the cliffs with my field glasses. MacLeod and I can share the night shift, turnabout."

"And if I go and moan to Marcel in the boulangerie about yet another delay," MacLeod continued, as two more men crowded into the office in response to Matthieu's shout, "it'll be all round Surtainville within an hour that I won't be moving in for weeks yet, and Carston might decide to take another chance. He must be way behind schedule by now, to have run the risk last night."

"Cell phone," Methos said, glancing across to MacLeod. "Let me have the number so I can call you if this Halcyon shows."

"I don't have one," MacLeod said.

"You don't have one," Methos repeated blankly. "MacLeod, this is the 21st Century! For God's sake, rejoin it! Everyone has a cell phone!"

"I just haven't got round to it," he protested. Snickering, Gervais opened one of the desk drawers and fished out a phone.

"Here," he said. "Use the office spare until you do." Then he looked up to meet Methos' eyes. "M'sieur Pierson, has Duncan warned you these people play rough?"

"Yes." Methos deliberately smiled his Adam smile, charming, diffident and a little shy. "I wrote the book on rough."

Gervais looked skeptical but didn't question it. Instead, he began the belated introductions.

"Do you play rugby?" Jean-Michel asked hopefully, as they shook hands.

"I refuse to answer that," Methos said, smiling, "on the grounds it may endanger my health. Besides, I have to be back in Paris before too long."

"Never mind that," Thierry cut in. "What's this about Carston? What's he done?"

MacLeod met Methos' eyes and got to his feet. "The boss'll explain," he said. "Adam, if you're sitting in an empty house for the rest of the day, you'll need food and a hot drink. I'll get you a vacuum flask of coffee."

"Thanks. I can buy something to eat at this boulangerie you mentioned. Just point me in the general direction."

MacLeod nodded, busied himself with the cafetière and one of the company-owned flasks, then led the way out of the door.

"Carston," Methos said as soon as they were halfway across the yard and well out of hearing range, "is beginning to seriously piss me off."

"Welcome to the club." MacLeod's smile was grim. "If we get lucky and have enough advance
warning, we can set up a reception committee for his next delivery, settle a few scores."

"Good. But if that doesn't work—" An implacable resolve showed in the cool, detached voice.

"It'll work," MacLeod interrupted. "We'll do this as legally as we can, Methos. I want us to be able to carry on living here when Carston and Stone have been wrapped up." Methos didn’t answer, but his angry impatience was easy to read.

MacLeod smiled at his lover's profile, and didn’t let his love blind him to the reality of Death. "Along that street," he said, pausing by the gates and pointing past the bookshop. "Take the second left, then the first right past the traffic lights. It's on the other side of the road, you can't miss it. I'll be at the house as soon as we close the yard."

They didn't embrace, didn't touch, but it was there in the connection between them.

Methos nodded, accepted the vacuum flask and shoved it in a coat pocket.

"See you later," he said, and started across the road. Then stopped and turned round. "Tell them, whenever," he suggested. "Your choice." He smiled and walked away.

###

The sniper bullet and the knife in the heart hadn't worked. Amanda stayed in Paris, and Adam didn’t return. Neither did Duncan. Melissa decided to rework her plans. She knew where Duncan was, thanks to Rees, so perhaps it was time to make sure of him. Rather than bring Mohammed to the mountain, she should try the alternative. After all, Joseph wasn't going anywhere. The last time she'd checked his case notes, his condition showed a steady improvement, so it was possible they might let him out of the hospital in the next week or so.

The difficult trick would be letting Joseph and Amanda know Duncan was still alive without alerting the whole of the Watchers' network. That would be too much of an added complication at the moment, so she hired a car and headed for Normandy.

###

Melissa found a small, family-run hotel near the town centre, and began to gather information. This wasn’t difficult. Surtainville was a small town, but it had the gossipy village attitude to life and people that she found very useful. Normally, the locals would be unwilling to talk about their own to a stranger, and a foreign stranger at that, but Melissa hadn't been head of PR for nothing. She had a way with people. Her knack of making the person she was with feel important, cared for, worked its usual magic.

When she targeted the women who worked in the various shops, cafes and coffee houses around and near the marina, she found quite a few happy to chat about the 'boys at the Dubosc yard' and their latest recruit who was surely a Bouvin, despite his foreign name. She also heard about the flare-up of trouble involving Patric Theroux, and his now ex-employer, one Jack Carston. Gossip also mentioned smuggling, and opinion was divided as to Carston's involvement. No one doubted
Theroux was in it up to his neck.

Jack Carston. That name rang an alarm bell, and she hurried back to her hotel to check it against Matthew's files. He was there, in the short-list of proposed involuntary Sanctuary candidates.

The information wasn't up to date, of course, but it was enough to show her that the immortal might be an asset. A scenario grew in her mind, painted in bright colors, and Melissa smiled happily. Yes. Jack Carston could be a weapon, if she played him well enough.

Melissa returned to the little bookshop that faced the boatyard. The two teenagers who worked there had been most helpful, both of them sighing over the Bouvins and their cousin (or half-brother) from somewhere north of Montreal. She teased them both gently as she bought an American paperback novel from their tourist selection, and they laughed with her. Then the boy called her to the window.

"Look," he said. "There's the Sensei. I saw him and Gervais take on Patric Theroux and his pack, just the two of them, before Matthieu arrived and drove his motorbike at them. That's Duncan, with the ponytail. He is truly magnificent, Madame."

Melissa stood at the boy's side and watched two tall men walk across the boatyard to the gate. All her attention was concentrated on one of them, and she sighed softly. Like and unlike. Poor Robert. He had been a pale shadow compared to the reality. Both men had the same grace and power, thanks to their martial arts background, but Duncan MacLeod had a certain majesty about him that Robert had lacked. The legacy, perhaps, of over four hundred years. She strained her eyes, wishing she could see him more closely, wanting, needing to see what it was about this man that meant Matthew had to die.

Then his companion moved in front of Duncan, blocking her view. She hissed her annoyance, then caught her breath on a gasp. That profile was immediately recognisable. Adam Pierson. He was here. With Duncan.

For a moment, Melissa struggled with incomprehension, until commonsense told her that Duncan must have gotten in touch with Adam, which was why he’d disappeared from Paris. And Amanda had stayed to keep an eye on Joseph. But why was Duncan still here? Surely he would have gone straight to Joseph as soon as Adam told him about the heart attack? Except Adam would have also told him Duncan MacLeod had died in Vienna and if Duncan went to Paris he'd almost certainly be spotted and reinstated on the database. So it was highly likely that as soon as Joseph was fit to travel, he and Amanda would come here.

All she had to do was wait, maybe nudge things along a little to make sure her plan stayed on track.

###

"Tell them," Methos had said, giving him free rein. MacLeod sighed. He had the simple choice of sooner or later. With the Carston situation on the front burner again, maybe personal issues should be put on hold. On the other hand, he didn’t want to start out in their relationship with a lie. While he valued his friendship with the Duboscés, the Bouvins and all the other clans in this tribal area, he had nothing he needed to prove and nothing he had to hide, except his immortality. Best they should know right from the start, as would Joe and Amanda when the time came. MacLeod decided he'd tackle the major hurdle first. Margot Dubosc.
Instead of heading for the House of the Lanterns as soon as the yard closed, MacLeod drove to the farmhouse. So did Gervais.

"I'm going to let them know Carston is back using the Lanterns," he said as he joined MacLeod at the front door. "If they find out from you, or someone else first, I'll get it in the neck. I don't like to worry them, but--" He broke off with an expressive shrug. "She's a stubborn old broom," he said affectionately.

"She's all of that," MacLeod said, smiling. "I'm glad you're here, I have something to say myself, and you need to hear it as well."

"That sounds like it could be ominous," Gervais said cautiously. "You want to go first?"

"No. You can hit them with Carston and I'll hit them with Adam afterward."

"Adam? What's the problem? I like the man, he has a neat sense of humor and he can't help it if he's English. Though you'd never know it from his accent. Speaks French as well as you and me."

"Carston first," MacLeod said, and shoved him through the door ahead of him.

"What about Carston?" Gaspard demanded, coming into the hall from the back door with a basket of logs in his arms.

"He's back, Grand-père," Gervais said. "Where's Grand-mère?"

"In the kitchen, of course, where else?" He pushed past them and took the logs into the sitting-room to stack by the fireplace. "When's this friend of yours coming to dinner, Duncan?"

"Uh, not sure," he said vaguely.

"Whenever, he'll be welcome. So what's Carston done now?"

"Come on into the kitchen, and I'll tell both of you," Gervais said as he opened the door. "Mmmm. Coffee. Grand-mère, I could kill for a mug of coffee."

"Tell us both what?" Margot asked suspiciously, setting extra mugs on the table and filling them.

"Carston's back," Gaspard announced gloomily. "Why can't the bloody man fall off one of his bloody yachts and drown, and leave us in peace."

"Back?" Margot barked, hands fisted on her hips. "When? Where?"

"We're pretty sure he sneaked an illegal or two through the Lanterns last night," Gervais said, dropping into a chair and pulling a mug of coffee toward him. "So we're going to keep a round the clock watch for the Halcyon, see if we can catch him at it when he does it again."

"Tell Roussel!" Margot shouted. "It isn't for you to play cops and robbers! That's what they get paid for!"

"It's all arranged, Grand-mère," Gervais said stubbornly. "Don't argue. Besides, Duncan has something to tell us as well."

"He does?" She rounded on him, already angry, dark eyes glittering like sword-points. "Well?"

"There's something you should all know," he said quietly, "and you may want to revise our business deal, and the way you've taken me in to your family."
"You've changed your mind about working for me?" Gervais frowned. "You're going to sell the house and move on?"

"No to both." MacLeod's smile was bleak. "Though it depends on how welcome we are in the area."

"Duncan," Margot said, hurt in her voice. "You and your friends are always welcome! How could you doubt--"

He put up his hand, stopping her words. "Your pardon, Grand-mère," he said. "This is Normandy, not Paris. Something that passes without comment in one place can be very unwelcome in another." He paused, looked at all three of them, one after the other. His own gaze was proud and steady. "Adam and I are lovers."

Gervais' jaw slackened. "That is not funny," he said after a moment. "How the hell do you expect me to believe that? You're not gay."

"I've made a lifelong commitment to another man," MacLeod said with a wry smile. "How else would you define it?"

"But--" Perplexed, shocked, Gervais sat back in his chair and gaped at MacLeod as if he had suddenly sprouted horns and a tail. He shook his head. "No," he said vehemently. "I don't believe it." Then: "It's your life, your choice, and God knows I have no right to question anything, let alone interfere, but how long has this supposed to have been going on?" he demanded, as if he was an indignant father quizzing a delinquent son.

MacLeod's sense of humor abruptly kicked in, and he had to bite his lip. "I've known Adam for years," he said. "But we became lovers last night."

"And already it's a lifetime thing?" Gervais snorted. "That's crazy! You're on the rebound from someone, aren't you? She hurt you and he stepped in, right? This Adam, what do you really know about him?"

"All I need to," MacLeod said. "I trust him with my life, as he trusts me. If you want my resignation, you can have it."

"Of course I don't! Duncan, you haven't thought this through! Grand-mère," he continued in desperation, "tell him!"

All humor gone and with considerable trepidation, MacLeod met Margot's gaze. If she was angry before, now she was furious, lips thinned, eyebrows pulled down in a frown. Gaspard was staring at him, an expression of great sorrow on his face, shaking his head slowly. Their emotions beat at him like staves. Disbelief, anger, disappointment, and something that might almost be pity, stung him to anger of his own.

"It's not something I would have expected from you," Margot snapped. "Do you know what you're doing? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Madame," MacLeod said, retreating into formality. Her frown deepened to outrage. "Yes, Grand-mère," he corrected himself and her expression lightened somewhat. "I'm sure."

Margot gave a sharp nod. "I will meet this young man. Bring him to dinner tonight. Eight-thirty. I'll let you know if I approve or not after that."

"The Lanterns--" Gervais started, "Carston--"
MacLeod didn't phone. Instead he drove to the Lanterns. Methos had established a watch-post right on the seaward end of the bay's southern arm, out of sight of any casual or not so casual observer. But MacLeod's Presence drew him out of the night-shadows into the open.

"You're late," Methos said cheerfully, climbing over the balustrade to meet him on the terrace. He was bundled up in several sweaters, his coat and a scarf, all of them dark, and there was just enough light from Flamanville and Le Sémaphore to show that his ears and nose were red from the cold wind. "But welcome." MacLeod yelped as Methos' freezing hands slipped inside his jacket, and sought the warm flesh under his sweater. "Very welcome. I've just eaten the last of my survival kit. Did you bring me any chocolate?"

"Shit, you're like ice! No. Grand-mère Margot wants to meet you," MacLeod said in a shivering rush, holding his lover close to share his body-heat. "I told her and she wants to check you out."

"Oh. Pistols at dawn?"

"That just about covers it. She isn't very pleased with either of us," he said, resigned. "But at least she hasn't kicked me out. Yet."

"Okay, I'll play along." Methos slid his hands down MacLeod's back and tightened on his ass, pulling him closer. "But you'll owe me," he purred. "It's not going to be smugglers' weather tonight, so dinner at the Chateau D'Or again and back to my hotel?"

"Sounds very good." MacLeod nuzzled into Methos' scarf to find the sensitive skin beneath his chilled ear. "But not tonight. You're summoned to dinner at the farmhouse."

"Huh. The full formal works, I take it?"

"Yes. She says be there by eight-thirty. Gervais will be there as well, and I have a hunch there'll be others."

"Damn. I'll have to go back to the hotel and change, and buy some wine from somewhere. You are going to owe me big time, MacLeod. I think I'll start a list."

"Two columns," MacLeod murmured, kissing his throat. "The second one for suggestions on how I can pay you back."

"Mmmm, I can be very inventive. But not in a howling gale on a cliff-top."

"We're on the terrace."

"In a howling gale. We could always go inside. We don't have to be Spartan about this." Methos snickered. "I could tell you things about the Spartans--"

"Blah," said MacLeod, kissing his mouth, "blah, blah."

Without breaking their embrace, he walked Methos back toward the solarium, freed one arm long enough to fish keys out of his pocket and unlock the doors, open them and steer Methos through. He used his foot to push them shut and the
sea-sound became a distant, muted whisper in the dimness, counter-pointing their own increased breathing. MacLeod removed the scarf, dropped it to the floor, and renewed his assault on the smiling lips. Methos’ hands clenched on his ass, fingers digging into the tensed muscles. At the same time he rocked his hips forward and opened his mouth, drawing MacLeod’s tongue deep into silken heat.

For one giddy moment MacLeod lost himself in the taste of sweet peppermint and chocolate and the heady essence that was Methos himself. Then between one heartbeat and the next, Methos took control of the kiss, his own tongue invading MacLeod's mouth and lifting desire to another level.

MacLeod took up the challenge. He wedged his knee between Methos’, leaned a little to increase the pressure on their trapped erections, and dueled tongue on tongue. Methos writhed against him, testing his strength, and then he felt that infinitesimal melt in Methos’ spine that signaled his victory. More than that, he felt Methos' joyous abandon--a split second before a heel hooked his ankle and he was toppling.

MacLeod broke his fall with his out-flung arm, and didn’t let go of the predator. He rolled them, pinning Methos beneath him. His lover was laughing in breathless delight.

"Okay," Methos whispered, "this time, I'll let you win." He grabbed MacLeod's hair and pulled him into a voracious kiss. "This," he panted when they came up for air, "is one reason why I hate the cold. Too many clothes to get rid of." Impatience and hunger burned through the link. "Want you. Now."

The dimness of the room was a warm quilt about them, Methos' features an indistinct chiaroscuro to be defined with fingertips, lips, tongue. Methos scrabbled something from his pocket, another of the small bottles of lube and pushed it into MacLeod’s hand. He tugged at MacLeod's belt, who moved just enough to give him room to unfasten buckle, button and zipper. Methos hauled on MacLeod’s sweatshirt and t-shirt to bare his chest, slid one hand up to find pebbled nipples, the other down to home in on MacLeod's hard and leaking cock.

"S'like playing Pass The Bloody Parcel," Methos growled. "And when the music stops, you get to rip off another layer.... Want you naked."

With a groan of pleasure, MacLeod thrust into the tight grip on his shaft, and Methos' hips rose to meet him. Neither of them were going to last long, MacLeod knew, their need was too urgent. But naked was a good idea. It wouldn't do for Methos to go back to the hotel in semen-splattered pants. And that went double for himself and the farmhouse. The thought of it was enough to take some of the starch out of his erection, despite Methos' skilled ministrations.

"What?" his lover demanded, outrage in his voice.

"Naked," MacLeod said quickly. "I can do naked." He prised Methos' hold off his cock, lifted the hand and kissed damp fingers, tasting himself. The flick of his tongue made his lover moan and writhe, and MacLeod wanted Methos' flavor as well.

Quickly, he stripped, then knelt at Methos' feet and pulled off his shoes and socks. Then he reached up and unbuttoned his waistband. He pulled down the zipper with care, feeling the thrust of Methos' engorged cock beneath the fabric. He leaned forward and pressed his face against the wet cotton boxers, breathing in the tang of arousal. The flesh beneath quivered and grew at his touch, and he mouthed the dampness, intoxicated by scent and taste.

His name on Methos' lips was a caress in itself, and he was close to the brink without any more stimulation than that.

He peeled off Methos' pants and boxers together, while his lover struggled out of his coat and layers of sweaters. Then MacLeod returned to Methos' freed erection, paused long enough to coat the heavy length with slick, then wrapped it in both hands. Methos growled and thrust into the tunnel of palms and fingers.

The slide of hot living silk in his hands triggered images in MacLeod's head. Images of this thick shaft pressing into him, filling him, pumping its seed into his body, and his own hips jerking in response. His back arched as his head dropped back, and he barely heard the hissed "Yeesss," from Methos.

Lube already covered MacLeod's fingers. He squeezed more from the bottle and dropped it, reached between his legs and smeared it in the cleft of his buttocks. His own touch was an added stimulant and he had to fight for control.

MacLeod changed his position to kneel astride Methos body, his thighs clamped on heaving, sweat-slippery ribs. He reached back, found Methos' cock and guided it to its goal, eased down onto the blunt head. Discomfort flared than disappeared as the glans pushed past the ring of muscle, and MacLeod was stretched by burning pleasure/pain. He welcomed it, wanted more. Methos' hips bucked in the short distance available and MacLeod sank down to meet him, taking his lover deeper into his body. Methos' cock stroked over his prostate and sensation exploded through his nerve ends. He rose a little and pressed down again, seeking that exquisite jolt, and found it. Methos was shuddering beneath him, body writhing, spasming, sharing each pleasure-shock through their link.

Methos gasped his name and began to laugh, the sheer unfettered jubilation of it coming clear through their bond. His hands tightened on MacLeod's penis, moving in time with their bodies, ecstasy and joy soaring fast to a double climax.

Slowly MacLeod slid to one side, feeling Methos' softened cock slip from his body with a vague regret. He curled along Methos' flank, head on his lover's chest and slowly licked his own seed from Methos' fingers. Methos' other hand stroked through his hair in a languid caress. The strong, steady heartbeat resonated through his body and Methos' quickening sang in his soul.

"Don't think you've got that quite right yet," Methos whispered. "Needs lots more practice."

"Mmm," MacLeod agreed. He was bonelessly content, wanted to stay there for the rest of the night, but….

"I know," Methos sighed. "The Dragon awaits. You have to go back to her and I have to go shopping. Do we have time for a shower?"

The hand MacLeod was cleaning was the one with a watch on its wrist. He turned Methos' palm, kissed it and squinted at the luminous face.

Time. He needed time to explore all this man was. Not hours or days but years that spun into centuries.

"We'll have it," Methos promised, touching his fingers to MacLeod's mouth. "A hundred years from now, it'll be 'My starship or yours?"

"But right now all we have isn't much more than an hour."
"Enough for a shower, then." Methos smiled. "Can't have you going back to the Dragon looking and smelling like you've just been thoroughly fucked."

MacLeod sighed, and got to his feet. Methos lay there for a moment, the glimmer of his skin a surreal hint of living power. Then he stood up with the grace of the hunter he was, and they walked side by side through the night to the bathroom, a pair of leopards, pacing.
Chapter 22

Gervais drove to Flamanville, but not to his own home. Instead he headed for Yves' cottage near the church.

"I don't know how to tell you this," he said, when Eloise went into the kitchen to make him coffee. "Duncan's just told us he's gay."

"Who's gay?"

"He is. Duncan. And this Adam is his lover."

Yves stared at him, expression, as usual, unreadable. "I never took Duncan for a fool," he said. "I thought he had a wise head on young shoulders. Seems like I was wrong." He paused. "Or maybe not. How did your grand-mère take it?"

Gervais gave a snort of laughter. "Not well. I thought she was going to use her rolling pin on his head, and Duncan thought he'd be thrown out of the house for sure. But she's decided we're having a dinner tonight, the full formal works, and Pierson's been invited."

"Poor bastard. Is she trying to scare him off? Find out what kind of metal he's made of?"

"Something like that. Duncan is practically family, after all. So I think we should all be there."

Yves nodded. "Count me in. I'd like to see more of Pierson, anyhow. Something tells me that one's deep and dangerous. And if he's a match for Duncan, he could be a good ally."

"What?"

"Can you see our Sensei getting involved with a fragile flower who'll need protecting from the rain?"

"No, but--"

"Exactly. Okay, he looks like a lawyer or something, but Pierson's got the same contained poise about him Duncan has, and it was the first thing I noticed about the man--apart from that nose. We'll need all the martial arts experts we can get against Carston and Theroux."

"But," Gervais protested, "they're fucking each other!"

"So?" Yves glared at him. "At least give Duncan the credit of telling you to your face and not living a lie. Which tells me that Adam Pierson is very important to him and no casual fuck. Just think on how much it must have cost him to tell Margot, let alone you."

"Yeah," Gervais said. "I don't think I could have done that. He's got courage, but...." His words trailed off, and he sighed. "Shit. Why did it have to get so complicated? As if Carston wasn't enough!"

"Then don't make it worse," Yves said quietly. "More importantly, if we're coming along to the meal, who's going to be watching for the Halcyon? Thierry was talking about taking Marie out for a meal tonight, and I wouldn't trust Matthieu or Jean-Michel not to go out there and sink the bloody boat if they had half a chance."

"Damned if I know," Gervais muttered. "And Grand-mère doesn't care. You know what she's like
when she gets a bee in her bonnet. Might as well try to reason with the barn door."

"Well, the forecast is for clear skies and a hard frost, not the kind of weather Carston needs if he's going to smuggle anyone ashore." Yves shrugged. "Let's hope they got it right this time."

"I'd be happier if I knew where the *Halcyon* was, though," Gervais muttered. "And the *Ariadne*, if it comes to it. Neither of them are in St. Helier. Damn it, they could be anywhere, picking up the next batch of illegals!"

"Tell me something," Yves said, a dour smile growing. "What will you worry about when we haven't got Carston and Theroux giving us stress?"

"Duncan's love life, probably," he said gloomily. "Gay! I can't believe it!"

"Where is he now?"

"Telling Pierson he's been summoned to Grand-mère's tonight. And I'd better let the others know. Duncan told me he'd tell them tomorrow, but I think I'll forewarn them. Bloody hell, Jean-Michel is going to burst a blood vessel. And Matthieu--"

"Then with any luck they'll be so mad at Duncan and Pierson, they'll forget about picking fights with Theroux and Anders."

"And we don't know where they are, either! Shit! And what about Saturday and the match with Les Pieux?"

"What about it? How is Duncan's sexual orientation going to affect that?"

"Well," Gervais began, then flushed and just threw his hands in the air. "Shit!" he groaned.

"Don't tell me, let me guess. For God's sake, the poor bastard's been sharing the communal bath at the club house for months now and he's not propositioned anyone, nor gone around with a flagpole of a hard-on at the sight of our naked bodies! So I think our collective virtues are safe, don't you?"

Face scarlet, Gervais muttered a curse under his breath. "I'm being an idiot, aren't I?" he said.

"Yes," Ives said bluntly. "Gervais, give yourself a break or you'll end up with ulcers. If you want something to worry about, try this instead: if you tell the rest of us tonight, they'll all want to be at this dinner."

"Oh, shit!" Gervais moaned again.

Yves was right. Half-an-hour of telephone calls later, Margot Dubosc's dinner would have twelve people sitting round the large table.

###

Gaspard Dubosc opened the door. "Come in," he said neutrally. Methos stepped over the threshold, cautious as a cat. MacLeod's Presence was clear and vibrant, an embarrassed hilarity riding through it.

Methos found out why when he was ushered into the dining room and Gaspard joined his wife. On
the old lady's other side stood Gervais Dubosc with a woman who was presumably his wife, and beside them were the Bouvin brothers. On Gaspard's side were Thierry Pitou and Yves Raoullin and their respective wives. All were standing between him and MacLeod in classic herd defence posture. The news had obviously spread. He ignored all of them but the Matriarch.

"Madame," he said with a slight formal bow and held out the bottles of wine, one red and one white, "thank you for the invitation."

"Thank you, Monsieur Pierson, for accepting," she said, equally formal, receiving the wine as her due.

"On behalf of Duncan's more distant friends as well as myself, we are more grateful than I can say," he continued, "to all of you. MacLeod has been drifting for far too long, and it's largely down to you that he's finally decided to stay put and give us chance to catch up with him. I, for one, intend to make sure he doesn't go in for any more solo wanderings." He met MacLeod's eyes over Margot's head. "And yes, Madame, my intentions are honorable," he finished.

"Pff," she snorted, reluctant amusement glittering in her dark eyes. "That remains to be seen. Come, sit, the meal will spoil if we keep it waiting. While we eat, you can tell me about Duncan's Parisian friends. He has said very little about any of you."

The dinner started out as an uncomfortable occasion, but Methos and MacLeod, although separated by the length of the table, extended their joint charms and expertise to good effect. Methos found it fascinating to watch the Datorigni charisma work its subtle spell, especially as he was pretty damned certain MacLeod didn't know he was doing it.

By the end of the meal, Methos had most of the company laughing with tales of some of Amanda's more hair-brained and less illegal schemes, including Matthieu and Jean-Michel. They had finally stopped watching him as if they expected him to drag MacLeod into a corner and commit unspeakable sins upon his person.

Margot stood up, an imposing, regal figure in her best dress of heavy black silk, with a gauzy scarf in autumn shades looped about her throat. "Monsieur Pierson will help me carry in the coffee," she announced, and walked out of the room.

Methos had no choice but to follow her, knowing she would be fitting him for the metaphorical thumbscrews.

"When did you decide on this?" she demanded as soon as the kitchen door closed on them.

He didn't pretend to misunderstand her, though it irritated him she should automatically assume he was somehow to blame. The fact that Margot was close to being right was immaterial, and it was up to MacLeod to tell her he'd reached the same decision independently, if he wanted her to know. Methos gave her the answer he'd given MacLeod. "March 6th, 1995," he said. "The day I first met him. He, of course, was oblivious."

"Why now? Why couldn't he remain oblivious?"

"Because I thought he'd been killed in an accident," he said, and the chill nightmare came back for
an instant, stabbing him with its jagged blades. "It wasn't until I went to identify the body I learned it wasn't him. That was when I realised exactly how much he meant to me. Life can be too short to waste it, Madame."

"Huh. The fact that such a relationship is against nature, against God's will, matters nothing to you?"

"Absolutely nothing," Methos said cheerfully. "We could debate nature and the will of God until the seas dry up and we would fail to agree. But no one gets to choose who they fall in love with, Madame. It's there or it isn't, regardless of gender, color or creed. A handsome face and splendid body doesn't come into it, either, though it's an added bonus. I'd feel the same way if he looked like Quasimodo. His soul is incandescent." And that was all he was going to reveal.

"Huh," she said again. "Very glib. What's your soul, M'sieur Pierson?"

"Black ice," he replied. "But MacLeod's working on it."

"Why don't you use his given name, since you are so devoted to him?"

He shrugged, feeling his cheekbones flush, suddenly unable to find the words. *Duncan... the incantation that could set fire to blood and bone and burn away the scars of ancient crimes.* "Because that's between him and me," he said finally.

"Your decision, your claim laid on him," she said, voice soft as a blade drawn from a sheath. "What of Duncan's wishes? Or have you dazzled him? What of Tessa, who he loved for so many years? What of Amanda?"

Part of Methos was surprised that MacLeod had opened up that much to this woman. It was another indication of how much the Duboscs meant to his lover, and he tempered his answer accordingly. "A small part of him will never stop grieving for Tessa. I never knew her, Madame, but by all accounts, she was a very special lady. To lose her the way he did opened up a wound that took a very long time to heal. Amanda helped there, and she is very dear to him." He paused and shrugged. "I can't tell you what MacLeod feels for me, that's for him to say. As far as I'm concerned, we're together for the rest of our lives. Even if we're on different continents, we're together."

"You haven't answered my question."

"No, I didn't dazzle him," he said, keeping the impatience out of his voice with an effort. She was getting under his skin and he didn't like it. The impulse to use scalpel-words to cut away her poise and force her to give ground was almost overwhelming. But MacLeod cared about her, and if she didn't return the liking, she wouldn't be bothering with the inquisition, so he held his temper on a short rein. "What can I say? We both reached out and found each other."

Margot studied him, features grim. "You're his choice, Monsieur," she said. "I don't trust you. Not yet. But for his sake, and the shadows that aren't there any more, you are welcome here. Just remember this: if you harm him, hurt him in any way, we will find you, Adam Pierson."

He nodded, speechless. MacLeod's concern washed over him, balm on the unexpected lacerations this formidable old woman had revealed--or inflicted.

She turned away, releasing him, and busied herself with the large silver tray and the best china. "Bring the cafetières, Adam," she ordered. Adam, Methos noted with a wry smile, not Monsieur Pierson. He obeyed, followed her in, and placed them on the table. "Now," Margot said, gathering
Evans stared at the computer screen, and sighed. Yesterday had been a good day. The Bréval manager and captain had given him an enthusiastic welcome and both men had been more than keen on the idea of future contacts. Dates and venues had been discussed, and the visitors had the offer of another game if they had the time to fit one into their tour schedule.

But now he was back in the insanity of the immortal world with a vengeance. The MacLeod file had not yet been updated. Maybe this Melissa Stone was waiting until she'd verified the sighting. He wondered how expert she was. She had to be pretty good to take Dawson's place, but there was a niggling unease at the back of his head that would not go away.

He called up Jack Carston's file, and the unease grew. The man was bad news, no question of it. Carston's current Watcher had gone beyond reporting the bare facts of his immortal's interaction with other immortals, he'd also put together a comprehensive dossier of the man's criminal activities over the last nine, ten years. Latterly this included his interest in and visits to the empty House of the Lanterns and his involvement with Henri Pasquier.

The last paragraph read 'Gervais Dubosc owns and runs the Dubosc & Son boatyard in Surtainville. He is a nephew of Pasquier's and was showing a lot of hostile curiosity in Carston's movements in the Surtainville-Flamanville area. It is believed Carston had already started his usual discouragement procedures prior to Pasquier's suicide. It is not known if the events are linked.' Which meant, based on Carston's past form, people were going to get hurt and probably killed, and it wasn't just MacLeod's neck on the line.

Well, if Ms. Stone didn't hurry up and log MacLeod's reappearance, sooner or later Carston's Watcher was going to pip her at the post.

That was her problem, not his.

He had other problems, most of them self-inflicted. He'd told her he was leaving, but he was still here. He'd said he'd had no contact with MacLeod, which was a lie. He'd also said he was a Researcher, not a field agent, which was undoubtedly the truth, and now he knew he could never operate in the field. How the hell do you make those moral judgments?

Okay, he could stand back and let immortals hack each other to pieces. It's what most of them seemed to do with the mindlessness of homicidal lemmings. But how do you stand back when immortals threatened mortals, mortals he now knew and liked, even though he'd met most of them only once? For the first time he found sympathy and fellow-feeling for Joe Dawson, who'd let personal choices override his Oath.

Right now, if he, Rees Evans, kept to the strict letter of his Oath, he would stay silent, let Dubosc, the Bouvins, Pitou and Raoullin dig themselves deeper into danger, and trust that MacLeod would be able to keep them safe. Or he could break his Oath and let MacLeod know he was facing another immortal. That would bring the Game into play, and MacLeod might well move to take Carston out of the picture before the situation escalated any further.

"Ah, Duw," he muttered. "What the hell do I do?" He glanced out of the window. The rain had
stopped and the sun was shining. Somehow that made up his mind for him. He shut down the computer and grabbed his coat, headed out before he changed his mind.

###

Evans reached the boatyard at midday, just as MacLeod's battered Citroen pulled out of the gates. He flagged the car down, and the immortal opened the window as he approached.

"Want to hitch a ride somewhere?" he asked.

"No," Evans said. "Listen, I took a few cheap shots at you and I was out of line. But this isn't because of that, it's for them, see." He nodded towards the boatyard. "There's something you need to know, then we're quits on all counts, okay?"

"Okay," MacLeod said cautiously.

Evans took a deep breath, like a man about to plunge into deep water. "Jack Carston is John Trecarrick. He was born in 1720 near Helston in Cornwall. His first death was in 1764 when he was caught smuggling by Revenue officers. He runs the Ocean Import Agency over in St Helier and he lives in St Mary's House, just outside Five Oaks." He turned and walked away.

"Thanks, Evans," he heard MacLeod say. "You didn't have to--" But he kept his head down and increased his stride. He'd broken his Oath but kept his honor.

###

Frowning, MacLeod watched Evans walk out of sight. Carston was an immortal. While he'd been tracking the man through his various business enterprises, the Watcher database was the one place he hadn't thought to search. Well, that threw a new light on the situation. Methos wouldn't be thrilled about it. He had a well-entrenched habit of disappearing fast when a potentially hostile immortal appeared unexpectedly on the scene. It was a tactic that had kept the ancient head attached to its shoulders for many centuries and would, he prayed, keep it there for many more centuries to come. His expression lightened briefly into a fond smile.

But more to the point, why was Rees I-Swore-An-Oath Evans telling him in the first place? A deep-rooted instinct told him the Watcher was genuine, but where the hell was the man coming from? He remembered their confrontation in Evan's hotel, the old grief he'd sensed in the man. A grief acerbated by being face to face with an immortal.

That was still there, and now confusion had been added to the mix, layered over a reluctant liking and tangled up with curiosity and fascinated horror. But over all was a pain-driven hostility that would not bend.

MacLeod started to get out of the car, needing to go after him, try to reach him, but stopped. There wasn't time, and Evans--Evans wasn't ready yet. The man had to be able to walk halfway to meet an immortal who both drew him and appalled him. Anything else would be too much like coercion.
Then his own confusion took over and scattered the fleeting impressions. Did all that come from his over-active imagination, or was it the Datorigni thing kicking in? The frown became a scowl as he pulled away and took the Flamanville road.

###

Evans' sense of unease was still there. It gnawed away at the back of his mind for the rest of the day, but the more he tried to pin it down, the deeper it buried itself. Eventually he shoved it to one side, did his best to ignore it and concentrated on the dinner menu in front of him. Then, as was the way with such things, the flaw presented itself for inspection.

Melissa Stone. 'Joseph is in the hospital,' she'd said. 'I'm covering for him.' Then: 'I guess that's my job as a substitute Joseph.' But Dawson wasn't in the field any more. He was in Research, so why would she say she was a substitute for him?

The unease became an ice-cold trickle down his spine and he shot to his feet, dodging round the waiter about to ask for his order. He hurried back to his hotel room, started up his computer and searched the database for her name. Nothing. He stared at the screen in disbelief. What the hell was going on here? What kind of game was she playing?

Maybe, said a lateral leap of intuition, she'd assumed Dawson had been sidestepped into Research because his designated immortal had gone missing. But MacLeod had been officially reported dead and she'd made no mention of that, or anything about an impostor.

The cold trickle became a lump of ice in his stomach. Maybe she'd lied about Dawson being sick as well, but she obviously had access to his home to have picked up the message he'd left on the voice-mail, so he couldn't just call the man. Was there a tap on the line, or had she played back his message? Or was he being paranoid?

In the end Evans compromised and called the Les Blues bar instead. That got him the name of Dawson's hospital, and four minutes later he was being put through to Dawson's room.

"I'm Rees Evans," he said, "and I'm assuming you never got my message."

"Never heard of you," said the rough voice. "Who the hell are you?"

"North Wales Research, based in Wrexham. Check me out on the database. If you didn't get my message, there's a good chance you never got MacLeod's letter, because his file hasn't been updated. If you don't already know, he isn't dead."

There was a brief silence on the other end of the phone. "How do you know that?" There was a dangerous edge to the man's voice, and Evans abruptly realised he wouldn't want Dawson as an enemy.

"Because I talked to him today. Who is Melissa Stone?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

"Because I don't have a fucking clue!" Evans yelled. "I'm Research, not Field and I'm groping in the fucking dark! She isn't on the database, she knows you're in hospital, and she somehow got that message I left for you on your voice-mail! So now, because of me, she knows where MacLeod is!"
I'm guessing she's an immortal and she's coming for his head, but if she is, she hasn't moved in on him yet. Then there's Jack Carston who's John Trecarrick, but I've warned MacLeod about him-- Dawson, what the hell do I do? I'm way out of my depth here!"

"Whoa! Slow down! You're not making a lot of sense. Pull yourself together and make a proper report. Where is MacLeod?"

It was a jolt as effective as a bucket of water in the face, and with his color high, Evans did as he was told.

At the end of it, Dawson made no comment. "Where are you now?" he asked instead.

"Still in Surtainville, in my hotel."

"Book me a room there. I'll be on the first train I can get."

"But you're sick!"

"They were planning on letting me out tomorrow, so they can let me go tonight."

"If she's got someone watching you--"

"They won't see me. I've learned evasion tactics from the best there is, Evans. Give me your number. I'll call you when I get to the station and you can pick me up. Oh, and Evans, if you talk to Mac again, you say nothing about hospitals or me being sick. You got that?"

"Yes," he said, relief washing through him. "Thanks, Dawson. Who is this Stone woman?"

"God knows. We've got a damn good sketch of her, but there's no match anywhere on the database. She's after Mac, that's all we know."

"We?" Evans queried. "You know what she looks like? Can you send it to me so I can keep an eye out for her as well?"

"They wouldn't let me have my laptop in here," Dawson said, irritation clear in his voice. "But I'll be bringing it with me. You can have it then." There was a brief pause. "Evans, did you say Mac had written to me?"

"Yes, a while ago now."

"And I've been stuck in here! Maybe she got it, or-- Fuck him! I bet the sneaky bastard kept it back so I wouldn't go charging off after Mac!"

"What? Who?"

"Doesn't matter. I'll deal with him when I catch up with him! At least he'll have told Mac she's after him. Shit!" Fury boiled over. "He's known where Mac is all this time and been stringing us along! Amanda will have his guts for this, and I'll fucking hold him down for her! Athens! I'll give him fucking Athens!"

The connection was abruptly cut, but Evans didn't care. Someone who knew what they were doing was on the case now, and he'd be more than happy to take orders.

###
There was the usual sense of homecoming as MacLeod let himself into the house, and combined with the embrace of Methos' Presence, it was doubly welcoming. He paused in the quiet warmth of the empty living-room to relish it, and Methos appeared, lounging in the doorway behind the bar.

They didn't need to speak, but MacLeod said it anyway. "It's good to see you. I wanted to be with you last night."

"Me, too." It had been long past midnight before the last dinner guest had gone home, and Margot had pointedly shown Methos to the door. They'd had no chance to talk privately, no chance to touch and let the contact link mind to mind. Until now.

Methos pushed away from his support and strolled towards him, a somewhat wicked smile growing. "And how was your morning, dear?" he purred. "Did they give you a rough ride?"

"Not as rough as I was expecting," MacLeod said, and walked into the open arms with a sigh of contentment. "Matthieu is okay with it, said he isn't surprised because I haven't shown any interest in the local girls since I got here. Jean-Michel seems to think it's a monumental bad joke laid on at his expense. Thierry agrees with Matthieu. He also took me behind the boathed and told me he doesn't give a damn who fucks who but if either of us starts to swish, he'll take a knotted rope to us. Yves—who knows what Yves thinks about anything? All he's said is he wants you to try out for the team, and after we've wrapped up Carston, you're to come along to the next training session."

"Oh, no! I'll watch, I'll help physio if Thierry wants me to, but no way am I going onto a rugby pitch with that pack of barbarians!" He leaned back in the circle of MacLeod's hold and studied his features. "You're hurting," he said. "Gervais. What about Gervais?"

"He's angry," MacLeod said with a shrug. "Doesn't know who to blame but feels someone should be. Me, you, Fate. If he could find a way to blame Carston, he'd be happier. He'll come round."

"And Gaspard?"

MacLeod's arms tightened. "He told me to do what I knew was right for me, regardless. I told him I was. He just shrugged and said 'then nothing else matters.' Grand-mère made that angry-cat noise of hers and threatened to box his ears, but she was smiling." He felt Methos relax in his embrace, felt the relief. "No sign of Carston or his boat?"

"Nope. I've got this cozy little watch-point out on the cliffs, remember, but it lacks basic things like a roof, so I got wet. It rained this morning, MacLeod."

"I know. I was out in it too." Methos' heavy wool sweater was still damp, the skin chill beneath it. "Go and take a hot shower while I put your clothes through the dryer. I've brought you soup as well as coffee and a couple of filled baguettes. And some chocolate."

"Now I know you love me. Have you located Carston's boats yet?"

"No. Of course, he might have other boats that aren't listed in his current name." He paused. "Talking of Carston, Evans met me as I was leaving to come here."

"What did he want? I thought we were anathema?"

"We are, but he still came up with the star prize," MacLeod said grimly. "He told me Carston is John Trecarrick, born 1720."
"Oh. I know this is going to be a waste of my breath, but now would be a good time for us to leave for parts unknown."

"Methos, I can't do that."

"I know, but I had to say it. In that case, we stick Stone on the back-burner, hunt him down and take him out, ASAP."

MacLeod nodded. "I'll take some time off, and go after Carston."

"Or I do. Right now."

"How many challenges have you fought recently?"

"As many as you have. I, however, have a sword, not an agricultural implement."

"He's mine." Henri Pasquier was there in his memory, along with Simone's shattering grief, so it was a statement of fact in a cold, hard voice that would brook no argument. Methos studied him with narrowed eyes. Then he shrugged.

"Okay," he said.

"I mean it. You do not buy in. When I challenge and fight him, it'll be by the Rules."

"Okay," Methos said again. His expression was open, serene, and MacLeod didn’t trust it. He could read little through their link but calm acceptance overlying irritated frustration, but it didn’t reassure him. "How about that shower and lunch? Stay and share them with me?" Methos pressed closer, molding his lean strength against MacLeod, a most effective temptation. "I have this fantasy--making love with you in every room in the house, and we've only crossed one off the list so far."

"I don't have a lot of time. If I'm late back, I'll never hear the last of it. They'll think--" Methos' mouth closed on his, tongue a gentle invader, and MacLeod was adrift on a wave of sensation.

"They'd be right," Methos whispered, breaking the kiss. "It's a pity I can't leave my mark, but I'll give it the old college try." He fastened mouth and teeth on MacLeod's neck, above his collar.

Lost in pleasure, MacLeod didn't answer. Holding this man, being held by him, was a joy beyond desire. Its counterpart was in Methos, and both were freely offered and accepted in a perfect synergy.
Chapter 23

Dawson didn't have to spend a lot of time thinking things through. The latest lecture from the heart specialist was fresh in his mind. Not that the woman had anything new to say, just re-enforced previous lectures with a no-nonsense bluntness he appreciated.

Basically it all came down to one simple fact. His time was fast running out. If he was careful, he could maybe live a couple of months, the key word being 'maybe'. If he wasn't, he could die any time.

Dawson had spent too many years compensating for old injuries and missing limbs. Now, he was going to spend his remaining time living his life under his own terms, and that didn’t come with the heading of 'careful'. Closures needed to be made, farewells to be said, and at the top of the list was Duncan MacLeod.

The chances were Stone was already on her way to Surtainville. It was highly unlikely she would still be keeping an eye on him. The main person he had to worry about right now was Amanda, because he didn’t know if she would help him get to Surtainville or not. Given how protective she was at the moment, the plans she had already made to wrap him in cotton-wool when he was released from the hospital, the odds were against her letting him go without a fight. Nor did he want her with him for this. It was between MacLeod and himself, no one else.

So he planned accordingly. Amanda had already spent time with him that evening, dressed up like a fashion icon for the premiere of a show, so she wouldn't be back at his apartment until the early hours. Tomorrow she was due to collect him at midday and ferry him back to his apartment. He'd leave a note for her with the ward's staff, telling her enough to set her mind at rest, but not where he was going. By the time she got it, he would have already seen Mac, said goodbye and passed on those private chronicles he didn’t want to end up in the Watchers' archives.

Once he'd seen Mac, spoken to Amy, Amanda and Methos, Fate and his failing heart and lungs could do what the fuck they liked. And he especially wanted to talk to Methos. What kind of game was the old bastard playing? Keeping Mac's letter from him, lying through his teeth--Methos and his fucking agendas. Uneasily, he wondered what was being planned this time, and why.

It took a while for Dawson to get himself signed out. The doctors were reluctant to let him go, but in the face of his calm determination they had no choice. He signed waiver after waiver, and eventually was in a cab heading across Paris.

Dawson didn't stay long at his apartment. He was able to sneak in and out the back way, avoiding Etienne. After collecting his laptop, packing a small case and retrieving the package of books from their hidden safe in the cellar, he got back into the waiting cab and was driven to the St. Lazare train station. He knew he was pushing is luck, but the growing sense of urgency in him, not unconnected to the constant pain in his chest, didn’t leave him with another option.

The nearest Dawson could get to his ultimate destination was Valognes. A phone call to Evans confirmed that was no problem; he would be there.

###
The train pulled into Valognes as midnight approached. Evans waited on the platform, a red-haired young man of average height, heavy-set, immediately recognizable from his file ID. Dawson was more than glad to see him. He was exhausted, and it took most of his remaining strength to walk the short distance to greet him. The slightly longer journey out of the station taxed him to the limit, even with Evans carrying his case. The package stayed with him.

"You shouldn't be here," Evans said, concern in his voice.

"Wrong. This is exactly where I should be. All I need is some rest and I'll be fine. Have you found out where Mac is living yet?"

"No, I, uh, well, I've been staying out of his way."

"Yeah?" Dawson stared at him. There was a flush over the man's cheekbones and he looked uncomfortable, wouldn't meet Dawson's gaze.

"We, uh, didn't exactly hit it off," Evans muttered. "Wait here, I'll bring my car round. No need for you to walk any further than you have to."

"Thanks," Dawson said wearily.

It took Evans only a short time to return with his car and put Dawson's luggage in the trunk. Dawson slid awkwardly into the passenger seat and relaxed with a sigh of relief. "So what's your problem with Mac?" he asked. "He's usually a pretty easy-going kind of guy."

"I took an Oath," Evans said stubbornly.

"Oh," Dawson said, and hid a wry smile. "So I guess you have a problem with me, as well?"

Evans shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. Can't say much, can I, since I broke it myself."

Change you hadn't?"

Evans shook his head. "No, I just wish I didn't have to. Those few words held a finality that told Dawson Evans wasn't prepared to discuss it, which suited him just fine. All he wanted right then was a bed to collapse into.

###

Dawson awoke in the mid-morning. He felt better, stronger, and the pain in his chest had receded to a constant dull ache. However, he'd slept later than he intended, and in an hour or so's time Amanda would be reading the note he'd left for her. He'd given her no real information, just that he'd discovered where Mac was and planned to meet him, and she wasn't to worry. He'd be in touch and let her know where they were later. Even if she somehow managed to trace where he'd gone, by the time she got to Surtainville, he would have seen Mac and handed over the chronicles.

Five fucking years. Five years too long, by any estimation, and he was impatient to see the man, hear his voice, judge for himself how MacLeod was after his self-imposed exile. Under different circumstances, he'd kick his immortal ass from here to next week, but now all he wanted to do was see him, talk to him.
A short time later, Dawson had eaten a late breakfast infinitely superior to the hospital food he'd had recently, and was heading back to his room. He met Evans on the way, and the young Watcher was hollow-eyed and haggard.

"You look worse than I do," Dawson said frankly. "I guess that's down to me, dragging you out to Valognes to meet the train."

"No, I just had a bad night, that's all. Couldn't sleep."

"Yeah, been there," Dawson said, opening his door. "Come on in, I'm just going to phone the boathouse, talk to Mac."

"How do you do it?" Evans sounded as if the words had been pulled out of him. "How do you justify breaking your Oath?"

"What?" Dawson stopped in his tracks.

"I warned him about Carston because of the Duboscs and the others at the yard, because I couldn't live with myself if they got hurt or worse. But--"

"Yeah?" Dawson snapped. "Don't you mean because you figured Mac could take him out and save the mortals in the process?"

"Well, yes. That's what they do, for God's sake, so there might as well be a useful purpose to the butchery! But I would no more make a friend of an immortal than I'd move in with a cage of leopards! I'm not saying Horton had the right idea. What he did was no better than what they do, but they are not some kind of god-like beings who can lord it over--"

That was when Dawson lost it. "Where the hell are you coming from, Evans?" he yelled. "You think these guys have it easy? That being an immortal is some kind of joy ride? They're human beings, you bastard, just like you and me! They're good and bad and shades of grey, just like the rest of the human race!"

"Or give a good imitation of it! Are you that sure they're human--"

"Where do you get this imitation shit from? That just because they don't stay dead, they don't feel like we do? Boy, you are so wrong! Dying hurts, Evans! I've watched people I care about die in agony, watched them come back to life in agony! I've watched them torn apart by grief because a mortal they love has died or is dying and there is absolutely nothing they can do to stop it!" His voice cracked and he didn't give a damn. "I've seen them so sickened by the killing they just hand the sword to another and just wait to die! There are some who won't even touch a blade, have never taken a head!" He lurched forward, crowding Evans back a pace or two. "Me, I wouldn't take immortality as a gift. The pain they live with is unbelievable, you know that? And it goes on, day after day, month after month, year after year, century after century!" He punctuated the words with hard jabs to Evans' chest, shoving the heavier man back toward the wall. "And they don't know why, any more than we do! All they can do is survive the best way they can--and try to stay sane! All we do is Watch the poor bastards, like they're animals in a zoo! And some of us have tried to wipe them out, maybe still are!"

"The Prize," Evans began.

"The Prize," Dawson sneered. "Oh, sure, there are some of them who are hungry for it, whatever it is. But there are more who either don't give a damn about it, or don't believe it exists. MacLeod doesn't want it, wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole! Amanda doesn't want it. Pierson doesn't
"You can't be sure of that!"

"Why not? I asked them, they told me and I believe them. You should try it."

"I swore an Oath! So did you!"

"Yeah, you're right. I did. And I broke it. You know what? I have never regretted it. I've Watched Duncan MacLeod for thirty years and more, watched him grow. Sometimes he annoys the hell out of me! Sometimes he breaks my heart. Sometimes he makes me so proud--he's family, Evans, and I take care of my family, when they let me! You better get out of here while you can still walk, you piece of shit, because if you don't, I will drop you where you stand!" And he took a two-handed grip on his cane.

Evans started to speak, but obviously thought better of it and backed out of the room, fast.

"Asshole!" Dawson croaked, the pain escalating in his chest until he could barely draw a breath. He dropped into the only chair, eyes closed, groping for his pills. He took one and willed himself to relax, praying for the agony to subside.

Evans was a blind fool, but Dawson was prepared to admit it wasn't entirely his fault. The man was partly reacting out of fear of the unknown, and that kind of primeval instinct wasn't easy to go against. Nor was it Mac's fault, nor that of any other immortal. The poor bastards weren't responsible for their genetic make-up, for Christ sake.

After a while the pain leveled off, but it was a warning shot he didn't need. He opened his eyes and reached for the phone, dialed the number Evans had given him for the Dubosc boatyard. When the call was answered, he gave his name and asked for Duncan MacLeod. He waited then, trying to control the tension that was tightening his chest again.

"Joe?" The familiar warm voice was like a balm and relief washed over him. "Hey, it's great to hear from you! How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. You?"

"Likewise." Dawson heard the smile in the immortal's voice, and found himself smiling. "Adam told me you didn't get my letter. He owes us both an explanation for that, but so far he isn't talking."

"Damn-right he does." It was a growl that promised retribution. "He's in Surtainville?"

"Yeah. He's been here for a few days now, staying in a hotel on the seafront. I'm kind of tied up for the moment, but is there any chance of you coming over from Paris any time soon? I've bought a house and I'd like you to see it."

"I'm already here," he said. "Mac, can we meet somewhere private? I need to talk to you."

"Sure," MacLeod said promptly. "How about my house? It's west out of Flamanville off the Sémaphore road, called La Maison Des Lanternes. Don't be fooled by the footpath sign, it's plenty wide enough for a car as far as the house. I'll meet you there. When?"

"As soon as you can make it."

"Half an hour. If this is about the Stone situation, Adam's already warned me and we've got it in
"Hand."

"Good. There's been another development in that quarter. She knows where you are. But this is about something else."

"Okay, so we can expect her any time." There was a pause. "Joe, is anything wrong?"

"Yes and no. It's nothing you can do anything about, Mac. We'll talk soon."

"Joe," he began, but Dawson interrupted with a chuckle.

"Half an hour," he said again, and put the phone down. Mac had sounded pretty good: positively cheerful and very much like his old self. Dawson felt as if a great weight had been lifted from him, and he left his hotel room with something of his old vigor.

Evans was waiting for him down in the foyer, and the first thing the man did was apologize. "I'm sorry," he said awkwardly. "I was way out of line. Again. It seems like all I'm doing these days is shooting my mouth off at people who don't deserve it."

"Forget it," Dawson said. "You've been dropped into a situation you haven't been trained for, and you've got personal issues. Most Watchers have, it's why we were recruited in the first place. I just wish you'd give Mac and the others a chance, you might find you like some of them."

"I think that's what I'm afraid of," Evans admitted tiredly. "What are your plans? Anything I can help you with?"

"I'm meeting Mac in half an hour at a house off the Sémaphore road out of Flamanville. Do you know it?"

"I can find it. I'll be your taxi-driver, if you like?"

"Thanks."

It started raining again as they reached Evans' car, but a line of brighter light on the western horizon hinted at better weather to come. Though by the time Evans gave in to Dawson's request and pulled up in the parking lot by the Le Sémaphore restaurant, the rain was torrential.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive you there?" Evans asked. "You're going to get soaked."

"I'm sure." Dawson didn't want another Watcher taking notes at this meeting. "It won't kill me," he added with a bleak smile. He clambered awkwardly out of the car, reached back in for the all-important package. Evans picked it up and handed it to him. He started to speak, but didn't.

"Thanks," Dawson said, and with the plastic-wrapped books tucked safely under his free arm he started along the wide path that curved up to disappear around a rocky outcrop.

"Are you going to be okay?" Evans called.

"Yeah, yeah," Dawson said, glancing back to see the young Watcher standing a few yards away from the car. "Go back inside. No sense in both of us getting wet."

It seemed to take forever, and the pain began to unfold again. Halfway there and out of sight of the parking lot, he stopped to lean heavily on his cane and catch his breath. He heard MacLeod call his name, and looked up to see the immortal running down the path toward him, grinning, splashing through the puddles.
MacLeod greeted Dawson with a spontaneous hug that briefly lifted the Watcher off his feet. Then he put him down and held him at arms length, frowning.

"You don't look good," he said. "Are you okay?"

"Uh, no. That's why I'm here." Suddenly this was very difficult. All the words he’d planned out in his head were crass, useless. "You need to have these," he said instead, pushing the package toward MacLeod. "Your chronicles, the private ones. I didn't want to run the risk of the Society getting them without your say-so. You did know I kept them, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, but--"

"Good. Read 'em," he added with a grin. "You won't get a chance to sue."

MacLeod automatically took possession of the books, his expression confused, anxious. "Joe, why are you giving them to me now?"

"I told you." He took a breath that was nowhere as deep as he needed it to be. "Mac, it's highly probable I won't see the year out. Odds are I won't last the month. Just wanted to say," he went on over the shocked and wordless protest from MacLeod, "it's been a great thirty-something years and I wouldn't have missed a second of it, the good times and the bad."

"Joe? What--?"

"Lung cancer and heart. Nothing they can do for me except buy a little time." "No! There has to be something! Specialists, second opinions--" "Been there, done that. Verdict's unanimous. Let it be, Mac." He paused to collect his breath. "If you want it straight from the hip, you can have it. I'm ready to go. I'm tired and I won't compromise any longer." There was more he wanted to say, like 'I love you, you're like a son to me', but his throat closed down and he couldn't speak. Instead he pulled the equally speechless immortal into a swift hug and turned to limp away.

Then the pain became a sudden stab of agony that locked his lungs. Dawson staggered. It tightened its grip, and he knew without a doubt that this was it. He'd finally bought the farm--well, a small piece of rain-hammered path in Normandy--

"Joe?" MacLeod's voice, startled, concerned, coming from a vast distance. His cane fell from his strengthless hand and he was falling, vision graying out, damaged lungs struggling to draw in air--"Joe! Damn you! Joe, fight it, man! Hold on--" His heart gave one surging beat, another, and he managed to pull in a single crowing breath before it dropped back into the erratic struggle. "Joe, fight it! Live!" Then, in a whisper, "You have to live.... Please, Joe?"

And Joe Dawson discovered that he wasn't quite ready to die just yet, but this was a battle he could not win. "Tryin'...." he managed, and felt himself lifted against MacLeod's chest. A hand pressed between his shoulder blades, another on his breastbone--and a furnace-fire of agony scorched through him. He would have screamed if he had enough air in his tortured lungs. He writhed, flayed from within and without until every nerve end howled its own separate pain.

This wasn't death. It was Life, more relentless and unforgiving than oblivion, and it tore its way in with unstoppable force, seared a path through blood and bone and every part of him--including the legs he no longer had. With it came sensations, feelings--emotions. Grief. Loss. Anger. Desperation. But Life swamped them all, filling the frail vessel of his body with an energy it wasn't designed to hold until he knew he was going to die for sure--and it ceased with an
abruptness that was almost as shocking as the torment itself. He was dropped, an ungainly heap in the puddles, rain lashing across his upturned face, staring at the horrified features of Rees Evans.

"He was killing you," Evans rasped, dropping Dawson's cane. "Joe--" Somehow he managed to turn his head. MacLeod lay a few feet away, an untidy sprawl of long limbs, his hair a seaweed spread on the path. Blood oozed from the misshapen dent in his skull to be washed away by the driving rain, and Dawson could see the pale gleam of bone and brain-matter. Dark eyes gazed sightlessly through the storm.

Dawson took a cautious breath. It hurt, but air flowed into his lungs and out again. The pressure eased slightly, the pain slackened a little and the waitingemptiness retreated.

"He was killing you!" Evans said again, disbelief in his voice.

Dawson couldn't argue with that. Whatever Mac had intended, it had certainly felt like he wasn't going to survive it. But what in hell had the man been trying to do--had done? The answer came with a rush of incredulity; use his quickening to kick-start a fibrillating heart? Nah. Couldn't be done. Could it?

Dawson drew in another deeper breath, found it hurt a fraction less, and began to think about moving. He was soaked to the skin, lying in a deepening pool of rainwater, and the cold was beginning to chill him to the bone. Evans, though, had other ideas.

"Lie still--" he started to say, but lean hands descended on his shoulders, threw him out of Dawson's range of vision, and Methos crouched in Evans' place.
Methos pulled up behind MacLeod's car and got out to be met by a blast of very cold rain. Other cars were parked there, and a solidly built redhead was hanging around at the top of the path, watching something or someone out of Methos' sight. Rees Evans, probably, playing the Watcher game, which meant that MacLeod was already at the house. Where he should be, if a traffic accident and resulting tail-back hadn't delayed him.

Gloomily, Methos huddled deeper into his coat and wondered if Dawson was there as well. The brief telephone message he'd had from an elated MacLeod had wrenched at him. He knew what Joe Dawson was coming to say, as surely as if the man had let him in on his plans. 'Hi, Mac, long time, no see, and by the way, I'm dying.' Or something like that.

He was cold, getting wetter by the moment, and part of him didn’t want to be there. He didn’t have to be linked to know what MacLeod's reaction to Dawson's news would be, and he had no wish to be around to witness it, let alone share it. But the rest of him knew the only place to be was at MacLeod's side. 'Datorigni are vulnerable,' Methos heard Darius say. And this particular death would wound his Datorigni to the heart. So why was he brooding around here like a molting cormorant?

He felt the warm resonance of MacLeod's Presence, felt the joy in it. MacLeod was coming to meet Dawson. Moments later the joy faltered, became shock and grief.

"Duncan," he said quietly, all his love and compassion and mourning carried in the single word and on the link they shared.

"Joe!" The shout was MacLeod's, an edge of panic in it that grated along Methos' nerve ends. Fear was in their bond, and he didn't have to guess what was happening. Dawson's heart had picked this of all times to pack up on him. There was nothing he could do, but he started to run anyhow.

So did Evans, and the Watcher went out of his sight at a headlong charge. Moments later, Methos heard Evans yell something, and the link to MacLeod was cut off with a suddenness that sent him staggering. He caught back his balance and sprinted forward.

Methos had a damned good idea what he'd see when he rounded the corner; MacLeod was a motionless sprawl and Evans was crouched over Dawson. He took hold of the young Watcher's wide shoulders and heaved him to one side. Dawson was conscious, aware.

"What happened?" Methos demanded.

"Heart," Dawson croaked. "Mac--"

"He tried to kill him!" Evans shouted. "Who the hell are--Pierson? Adam Pierson?"

Methos ignored him, all his attention on Dawson and the pulse that beat frantically under his fingers. There was something else under his touch, a thrum of energy, achingly familiar. "Just lie still," he said. "Try to breathe slow and deep."

"I'm okay. I think."

"Bullshit! You've had another heart-attack, moron!" Methos snapped. "Where are your pills? You do have pills?"
"Left coat pocket."

Methos found the small bottle, shook out two of the tablets and pushed them between Dawson's blue lips. He took a swift glance around, eyes lingering briefly on the still unbreathing body of Duncan MacLeod. He snaked out a long arm and grabbed Evans' wrist in a grip the bigger man couldn’t break. Just to be absolutely certain, turned it to check the tattoo. He gave a snort of derision. "Another one who plays fast and loose with the bloody Prime Directive. Okay, friend Watcher, get Joe to the hospital. It's east out of Surtainville on the D66, and update me ASAP. Do you have a pen, paper? I'll give you my cell phone number."

"Tell me and I'll remember it."

"Okay." He reeled off the numbers and Evans repeated them without a fault. "Good. Now move. I'll take care of the other idiot."

"But--" Evans started.

"Do it! Now!"

"An ambulance--paramedics--" Evans was clearly not one to give ground easily. Until he met granite eyes as cold and bleak as the cliffs of Flamanville and the words froze in his throat.

"S'okay, Evans," Dawson broke in, "Adam's right. Faster for you to drive me there."

Evans nodded. He crouched and slid his arms under Dawson's shoulders and knees, and carefully lifted him. With no sign of effort, he stood up, the older man cradled in his arms. "Later," he said with quiet dignity, "someone is going to tell me why he tried to murder a man who's been a good friend--"

"He wasn't," Dawson muttered. "Heart attack. Mac tried to stop it happening."

"Save your breath," Methos advised, "and your strength. We'll follow soon, when MacLeod comes back and we've changed into dry clothes."

###

It wasn't easy to smuggle a corpse into a hotel. Especially when the corpse is six feet tall and some 200 lbs of long muscle. Luckily the few guests were in the dining room, tucking into lunch, which was where Methos wanted to be. Instead he had to lug said 200 lbs of dead weight across a thankfully deserted foyer and into the elevator. It would have been very difficult to explain why he was trying to conceal such an obvious corpse-- "No, he isn't really dead, and that isn't really blood and bone--or brain because he hasn't got any--" Fuck it, head injuries were so--messy. Nearly as messy as stomach wounds. At least he wasn't attempting to stuff yards of intestines back into their rightful body cavity. He kept up a mindless internal chatter, while beneath it all his defences were concentrated around the hearth-fire at the core of his being.

To Methos’ relief, he reached his room without anyone seeing them, and managed to open the door without dropping his burden. Balancing the slack weight awkwardly, Methos snatched the plastic liner out of the waste bin by the drawer unit, threw the pillow to the floor and spread the plastic in its place. Then he lowered MacLeod onto the bed. The man still showed no sign of coming back, and Methos didn’t like it. By now the MacLeod Presence should be making itself felt, and healing
should have started. That it hadn't, given the unmistakable, if faint, unique signature of Presence he'd sensed in Dawson, was more than a little worrying.

Okay, he'd carried a fragment of MacLeod's quickening for years, with no apparent ill effects to either of them, and now MacLeod had a part of his. But Joe Dawson was mortal, and what MacLeod had tried to do seemed to have been a hell of a lot more than sharing a fragment of himself. He could well have killed Dawson as effectively as the heart attack itself.

It wasn't the first time an immortal had attempted to use their quickening to save a loved mortal's life, nor would it be the last. He'd done it himself, and failed. He knew that Darius had tried it, time and again, and failed. It just didn't work that way. So why was that MacLeod spark lodged in Dawson's body? What was different?

Death? Evans' blow had killed MacLeod instantly, giving him no chance to stop pushing his quickening into the dying man and break the connection. Methos shivered. He'd shared MacLeod's shock and grief through the link between them. Had felt his instinctive need to do something--anything--to stop this death happening. Shit, he'd been there himself enough times in his centuries-long existence to know what drove his lover, even without that bloody Datorigni-born urge to give, protect.

Methos sighed and scrubbed his hands through his hair until it stood on end. If Dawson survived this, there might be a lot of questions asked. Damage limitation. He'd have to make sure Evans kept his mouth shut, one way or another. If Dawson survived. Wishful thinking. He should have outgrown that a very long time ago.

But a part of MacLeod's quickening remained in the Watcher, and instinct told him that could not--should not--be. Too much energy was involved, like trying to run a toaster directly off the electricity grid. Mac had to take it back. Somehow. When he decided to live again.

Working quickly, Methos stripped the wet clothes from the unresponsive corpse, and wrapped him in towels. He carefully washed away the blood and brain-matter clotted in the long hair.

Still no sign of returning life. He folded his arms across his chest, holding the undiminished essence that was Duncan MacLeod safe within the walls of his own quickening. All he could do was wait. Wait for MacLeod to come back to life. Wait for Joe Dawson to die.

Sometimes immortality was more bitter than aloes.

***

"We've been in touch with Monsieur Dawson's specialist in Paris," the doctor said, "and she's emailed his records to us. We'll be doing follow-up tests of our own, of course, but I'm afraid his situation does not look good."

"He's a fighter," Evans said. "He'll get through this, I'm sure of it."

The doctor's expression didn't change. "You are a relation?"

"No, a business colleague. He has a sister in America. And a nephew here in Normandy," he added, remembering the angry 'he's family!' "A friend is trying to reach him, get him here."
"Good. This would be Mac? He's been asking for him."

"Yes, Duncan MacLeod. Can I see Mr. Dawson, please?"

"For a few minutes. Set his mind at rest, if you can. He seems concerned about this Mac, and the less stress he has, the better."

Evans nodded and followed the doctor into the IC unit. Dawson was in a small screened off alcove, tubes and wires linked him to the equipment keeping him alive. The man was conscious, but drowsy.

"Mac," Dawson said. "Have you heard from him?"

"No, not yet. They don't allow cell phones in hospitals. Pierson will get him here."

"Amanda's going to be so pissed."

Evans glanced around. The doctor had gone and they were alone for the moment. "Dawson, what happened? I thought he was killing you."

"Sure as shit felt like it. Think he was trying to use his quickening to shock my heart out of spasm. Kind of like using a hammer to crack an egg."

"Oh." Evans' jaw dropped. "That's-- Dawson, I, uh, I'm sorry. I over-reacted--" He broke off, unable to say more. He'd swung that cane with all his strength, because for that brief second it hadn't been Duncan MacLeod and Joe Dawson, but David Tasker crouched over the body of Alun Jones. But the memory of the way bone had given under the impact still sickened him. MacLeod was immortal, he'd come back, but that didn't stop Evans' stomach heaving.

"Don't know that you did," Dawson said gruffly. "Mac was desperate. He didn't know what he was doing or what it would do to me, just knew he had to do something, anything, that would maybe stop me dying on him."

"You can't be sure of that."

"I'm sure." Wearily, Dawson's eyes closed. "If that was anything like what they go through every time they take a head, they're sick masochists, every last one of 'em. But you pick up things from a quickening, at least, I did. More like a kind of empathy than telepathy. I know what Mac was feeling when I collapsed." He moved restlessly, eyes blinking open. "I gotta get out of here."

"No, you don't. Damn it, Dawson, you had a heart attack! You nearly died!"

"Yeah, so what? Today, tomorrow, next week, what difference does it make? I got cancer, Evans, hardened arteries and a heart that's shot to hell. Nothing Mac could do, or these people here, is gonna change that. I got my chance to say goodbye to him, that's what counted with me."

"He means that much to you?"

"Yeah." He closed his eyes again. "Yes."

"I'm going to call Pierson," Evans said. "I'll be right back."
He drew in a sudden breath, heard it loud in the limbo that engulfed him, took another, and knew he lived. Gradually he became aware of the pain in his skull, the steady beat of his heart, and a cool silken Presence that spoke of chill bastions surrounding him, protecting him.

"Methos," he whispered, heard footsteps, felt a hand on his forehead. The touch was brief, a swift and unnecessary check on his temperature that also imparted relief and a deep abiding love.

"About bloody time," Methos said sourly, words and tone in direct contrast, and the same hand gave him a brisk slap on the shoulder. "You timed that well. I've just made myself a coffee. I suppose you'll want one now?"

"Joe?" It was surprisingly difficult to talk, and to open his eyes. The effort was enough to make his head swim.

"In hospital, giving a good imitation of the Perfect Patient. You're in my hotel room giving a good imitation of a corpse for far too long." An arm pushed beneath his shoulders and he was lifted enough for pillows, cushions, something, to be shoved behind him, and was settled back onto them. The pain and the lethargy didn't let go. "That should improve your view of the world, and make sure you don't spill coffee on my bed," the acerbic voice went on, totally at odds with the gentle hand stroking through his hair and the fiercely protective love coming through their connection. Along with that love was a fast-growing anxiety. "Come on, MacLeod, snap out of it. You're not auditioning for a soap opera."

MacLeod forced his eyes open, met his lover's steady hazel gaze. The lightly tanned, clever features with its arrogant nose and thinned mouth showed nothing but impatience. The link told him the reality. Methos had been keeping a tight rein on an anger generated by relief, and was now becoming increasingly worried. He tried to gather himself enough to offer reassurance.

"I'm fine--Joe," he managed. "He…." And lost the thread of what he wanted to say.

"Had a heart-attack. A classic of its kind." Methos' voice was studiously light. "But he's okay so far. Would you care to tell me what you thought you were playing at?"

Confused, disoriented, MacLeod stared at him. "What?" he managed.

"Oh, wonderful." Methos' anxiety was rapidly transmuting to something that might almost be apprehension, and it hammered at MacLeod. "We don't get amnesia unless we work at it. So you had your brain dented by a walking stick, but--"

"I did? You hit me? Why?"

Methos' eyes rolled up in exasperation, and the apprehension in the bond deepened toward fear. "Yes, no, and he thought he had a good reason."

"Who?"

"Rees Evans. Remember him? Built foursquare like a brick shit-house. Plays loosehead prop for the Wrexham Dragons, and has plenty of muscle to put behind his swing at you. Remind me to wash off Joe's walking stick before I give it back. He won't want it with your blood and brains all over it; he'd probably have a relapse. On the same subject, why did you automatically assume it was me that had walloped you for six?"

"What?" MacLeod demanded again, more strength in his voice now.
"We normally take anything from five minutes to an hour to come back from the dead," Methos went on, a frown growing. "This time it took you four hours and thirty-four minutes from a whack on the skull you should have shaken off in half an hour at the very most."

"Oh." Something like panic stirred in MacLeod's gut, and he blocked it off before, he hoped, Methos picked up on it. He reached out an arm that didn't shake too much, and helped himself to the mug of coffee on the bedside cabinet. His lover's frown darkened to a scowl, and an invisible silk-swathed embrace tightened around him.

"That was mine," Methos pointed out, but his hand on MacLeod's helped to steady the mug. As it had before, contact reconfigured empathy to something approaching telepathy, though this time MacLeod found it impossible to concentrate enough to translate the tangle of words and images coming from Methos.

MacLeod took a sip of the hot liquid, hoping the caffeine would jolt his brain into some sort of order. "Methos, I don't remember Evans, or being hit, just Joe having a heart-attack." He looked into the depths of the coffee. "I thought he was dying, Methos." Emotion blurred his voice.

"Yes, well, so did he. More to the point, so did Evans, only he thought you were killing him."

"What?" It was a shout of outrage. Methos rescued his coffee, put the mug safely back on the cabinet.

"Will you be more careful! I've got to sleep in there tonight! Forget Evans. We have a couple of other things to talk about."

"Like what the hell is going on here?" MacLeod muttered. The pain in his head was almost gone, and he desperately needed answers almost as much as he needed to see Joe Dawson and reassure himself the man was okay.

"You and me, both," Methos said, responding to the need rather than the question. "Right now, there's Carston and Joe. I take it offing Carston is now on hold until Joe's out of the firing line. Then there's your quickening. Part of it is still in Joe. How the bloody hell did you put it there?"

MacLeod stared at him, slack-jawed. "It is?" he said weakly. "I--don't remember. But he's mortal, so--it's not possible, is it?"

"Well, obviously it is," Methos retorted.

"What about Joe? He's okay, you said?"

"So far. But your quickening can't stay there. Think about it. Whatever you did, it worked enough to shock his heart out of fibrillation and start it beating properly again. Joe's still alive, but it could blow every fuse he's got. He's drugged and plugged into gadgetry, but all that energy is running through an already weakened system."

"Oh, shit."

"That just about covers it. Perhaps if Evans had just pulled you away, broken the connection, your quickening would have gone with you, but he didn't. He killed you. Fuck it, I'm groping in the dark here!" The sudden flare of Methos' fear-driven anger scorched through MacLeod's nerve-ends, and was immediately reined back. "Try to remember. Joe went down, you went to him, grabbed him and--what?"

"I--" MacLeod screwed his eyes shut. The pain was gone now, the lethargy fading, but the gap was
still there. "I don't know. I have to see Joe."

"You will. Evans phoned while you were out of it. Joe's stabilized and he's in the ICU. You're his
nephew and they're expecting you."

"Thanks. They'll tell me more if they think I'm family."

"Don't thank me, it's Evans' idea," Methos said with a bleak smile. "I fancy he's feeling some guilt
right now. He hit you a hell of a lot harder than he needed to. What have you done to him,
MacLeod?"

"Nothing. Except be immortal, and alive, which his uncle isn't."

"Ah. Yes, that would do it, I suppose. By the way, I phoned the boatyard," Methos went on, "told
Dubosc Joe was in the hospital and you wouldn't be back today. He said take all the time you
need. I phoned the Matriarch and told her as well."

"Thanks," MacLeod said again. "Methos, Joe gave me a package just before he collapsed. Books,
my chronicles--"

"Don't sweat. It's in the back of my car, along with his cane. He can have the lot when he's out of
hospital. Unless you want to keep the books?"

"No. They're his." He opened his eyes. "Did you lose our link when I died?"

"Yes and no. Your quickening was still in here," Methos said, touching his chest, then laid his hand
on MacLeod's. "I knew it would be. But the empathy was cut off. Abruptly. Not like just walking
out of range. I--didn't care for that, much."

MacLeod covered Methos' hand with his own. "But it's back, right? I can feel you, so you can pick
up on me?"

"Yes." Methos turned his wrist, clasping his hand in a strong grip. "Don't worry. We'll work this
out. When you get your bit of missing quickening back, it'll probably repair that hole in your
memory." How he was supposed to get it back, MacLeod didn’t know, and he sensed Methos
didn't either.

He tightened his hold on Methos' hand, needing the contact, needing more, but not able to reach
out. He replayed the scene in his head, felt the cold strike of the rain on his skin, saw Joe collapse
to the ground, face twisted in agony, mouth gaping in a vain attempt to breathe. He'd grabbed him,
lifted him, begged him to live, and Joe had croaked, "Tryin'...." Then--nothing.

Fear was a slow-growing knot in his abdomen. The gap in his memory could only be a matter of
minutes, but it was like a wound that would not heal. He could remember receiving his share of
injuries when he was mortal: the pain, the fevers, the aching discomfort that went on and on for
days. Sometimes he'd had a concussion and the blinding headaches and double vision that went
with the territory, but never before had he suffered any loss of memory.

"Just take it easy," Methos said. "I'm almost certain it's tied up with Evans' cracking your skull
open. But it's not worth sweating over, it's only a handful of seconds out of over four hundred
years, for god's sake!"

"In which I seem to have shoved my quickening into a man having a heart attack!"

"Who is now stable in the hospital. MacLeod, will you stop tearing yourself apart! Whatever you
did, it worked! We'll talk about the whys and wherefores when you've got it all back." Again the confidence that didn't match the uncertainty inside. "Now stop stalling and relax."

But more than Methos' resonance was wrapped around him. There was a warmth that offered reassurance and a strength he could lean on for a while-- "Vampire," said Evans' voice in his head, and he slammed up every barrier he had.

"No," Methos whispered. "No, Datorigni. You can't give all the time. Sometimes you have to accept." He was gathered into strong arms and Methos' hand splayed around the back of his skull, cradling him close.

"Methos, what if--"

With a grunt of exasperation, Methos took a handful of hair and pulled MacLeod's head back. "You," he said, "are talking too much." And kissed him.

As a distraction technique, it was first class. The heat of the mouth gently devouring him, the tongue coaxing, probing, drove all other thoughts out of his head. Methos was the beating heart at the centre of his universe, all that was pleasure and mystery and searing passion and he opened himself to the ice and fire contradiction that was his lover.

With a murmur of pleasure, Methos deepened the kiss, his free hand sweeping down MacLeod's body and dislodging the towels wrapped around him. At the same time MacLeod reached for him and closed his arms around the lean, powerful body. On some level he was aware that Methos needed this, needed it as much as he did himself. His death at Evans' hands had left a wound in Methos' psyche that had yet to heal. The connection between them waited to be fully explored, but with Evans' strike they had learned the hard way that it could be a curse as well as a blessing.

The deeper the love, the greater the grief. The brighter the light, the darker the shadows.

But MacLeod acknowledged he'd sooner have one week with his lover and pay the price of loss, no matter how great that would be, than never to have known that love at all. He could only hope Methos felt the same way.

"I do," Methos whispered, and slid out of MacLeod's arms. With economical speed, he shed his clothes but didn't return to MacLeod immediately. Instead he stood by the bed, flesh proudly erect, but eyes and face expressionless, detached. The emotions in him were as clear to MacLeod as if he'd shouted them aloud.

They'd had a few snatched moments together since they first become lovers, but there'd been no time available to rediscover the slow erotic delight of each other's bodies. No time to share the giving and receiving until pleasure became an entity in itself. No time to open to the incandescence that fed on itself and them and webbed them with living light. The link between them, still so new, showed MacLeod that Methos wanted it, wanted to reinforce the Seal that surely meant they would never be truly parted again. Had to mean that, because the alternative was untenable. And this time Methos was afraid. The immensity and uniqueness of what was between them now, was overwhelming.

This wasn't just a love affair. It was far more than a spoken commitment to a life together. That first time they had fallen into those deep waters unknowing, unsuspecting, but not this time. Now they knew of the undercurrents, the unexplored depths and far reaches of a previously unguessed-at sea. Knew, too, that in some indefinable way, this was their natural element. Yet fear of the obscure remained and found its twin in MacLeod's heart.
So MacLeod opened his inner walls, and let in the sea.

Methos made a sound that was part moan, part growl, and closed with him, his need and hunger a storm-force. MacLeod rode with the driving hips that ground their erections together between their bellies, arms anchored around Methos' ribs. Going with the tide gave him some measure of control and he didn’t completely lose himself to the ecstasy. His hands feather-touched over locked muscles, each caress redefining with quickening threads his lover's spine and shoulder blades, and the cling-silk texture of sweat-dampened skin. Somehow he caught the fire and wove it into a pleasure-net that cloaked them, the rich harmonics of their differences and their similarities part of the pattern, strengthening it as the different metals strengthen a fine blade.

Gradually Methos relaxed, his frenzy transmuting to a more sensual urgency. There was no apology; none was necessary. The sharp teeth that had fastened onto MacLeod's neck became a kiss that took away the blood. Then MacLeod let go and the sea carried them both away.
Chapter 25

Coming down from the incredible high of that augmented love-making was a slow and gentle descent. The heightened telempathy gradually ebbed as well. Just the currents of strong emotions crossed the link, clear thoughts and images only with contact and concentration. After the soaring elation that reaffirmed and consolidated it, their link settled to a warm awareness, a melody line threading through the rich harmonics of their quickenings, tying them together.

But all they had to do was reach for it and the ineffable ecstasy would be theirs again.

"Like the finest vintage wine," Methos murmured into MacLeod's hair. "Fantastic, but you couldn't drink it at every meal. I think my brain has fried along with my balls."

MacLeod chuckled quietly. "You have the soul of a poet."

"One of my many talents. How do you feel?"

"Fine. Better than fine, here with you." He stroked his fingertips down Methos' spine, won an arching stretch and a moan of pleasure.

"That isn't what I meant," Methos said, "but don't stop on my account."

"Fine," MacLeod repeated, "but the gap's still there."

"Then we'd better do something about it." With another moan, of effort this time, Methos sat up, leaning on McLeod's chest. "God, my bones have melted as well."

MacLeod snickered. "Poor old man." But his heart wasn't in the banter. Joe Dawson was lying in an ICU bed while he and Methos screwed each other senseless-- A pointed finger speared him in the ribs.

"Stop that," Methos ordered. "That wasn't just screwing. It was therapy for both of us. Now we go to the hospital, and afterwards, we go to the farm and eat."

"We do?" MacLeod eyed him warily. "That might not be wise."

"The Matriarch commanded it," Methos said cheerfully. "We have to go back to her for a meal when we come out of the hospital. When I phoned her I happened to mention that you'd had no chance for lunch in the rush to get Joe to hospital, and she insisted."

"If you're okay with that?"

"Of course. She and I have an understanding."

"Oh?" MacLeod eyed the blandly amused face warily.

"While I keep you happy, I'm welcome at her table." He smiled an Adam smile. "It's lucky Pierson can be such an inoffensive little nerd, isn't it?"

"Huh." Not that Methos had been showing much of that particular aspect of the Pierson persona recently. "And the quality of her cooking has nothing to do with it?"

"Of course not! How could you think it, MacLeod!"
MacLeod didn't reply. His thoughts were still on the Watcher. "How the hell do I take back my quickening?" he demanded. "What do I do, Methos?" But he knew what the answer would be before the words were spoken.

"I have no idea." Methos shrugged. "Reach out for it? Whistle? Go with your instinct, MacLeod. What's puzzling me, though, is where's Amanda? How did Joe manage to dump her and, with any luck, Stone as well?"

"I hope Amanda remembers he's mortal before she kills him," MacLeod said with an attempt at a smile. "Or maybe she'll just start with you and forget about him. After all, he's a sick man."

"I rely on you to protect me, MacLeod."

MacLeod leaned across and kissed him.

"Yeah, right," he said.

###

Any hopes MacLeod had that Dawson wasn't as sick as he'd thought, were swiftly dashed by the doctor. Heart, lungs, arteries, all shot to hell, and the prognosis was bleak. Joe Dawson could die any time. Certain still-experimental drugs might hold out hope of an extension, but their usefulness was debatable. Dawson had already rejected the idea.

MacLeod's jaw set in grim determination when he heard that.

"Not if I have any say in it," he snapped. "I'll talk to the stubborn bastard, see if I can change his mind. I don't suppose I can over-ride him, can I?"

"No, Monsieur," the doctor said, shaking his head. "He is of sound mind. The choice is his. But I hope you succeed. Although he's stabilized, his condition isn't good. I can only allow you a few minutes and that is to set his mind at rest. He's been concerned about you."

"I know. Thanks, Doctor."

With Methos at his side, McLeod followed the Doctor down the corridor. As they reached a closed door, the hint of what might be a pre-immortal Presence reached him, but without the discord. It sank into him, resonating with his own, not a harmony, but an exact echo.

Startled, he glanced at Methos. Who smiled and shrugged, and said nothing.

When he entered the small room, Dawson was awake and watching for him, gaze expectant and not a little rueful. Evans stood by the bed, his expression a mixture of defiance, embarrassment and grudging respect. MacLeod gave the younger Watcher a brief nod and turned all his attention on Dawson. "Joe, how are you doing?" Concern roughened his voice and he put out a hand towards Dawson's shoulder. He felt a strange pull--

"Oops," said Methos and stepped back quickly, dragging Evans with him. At the same time a lance of blue-white fire arced from Dawson's body to the outstretched hand and MacLeod staggered back into Methos' supporting hold. Evans was frozen to immobility, Dawson was convulsing and the monitors were going crazy. A pair of nursing staff came in at a flat-out run and the three men were
shoved from the room.

"That was interesting," Methos commented as they settled into the small waiting area off the main ward. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," MacLeod said. His head was ringing like a soundless bell, but for what it was worth, he had his missing few moments back. Not that he gave them much thought. Joe Dawson was the only thing on his mind. He paced restlessly, unable to be still.

"Your quickening was still in him!" Evans said in a shocked whisper. "How?"

"I don't know!" MacLeod snapped.

"Don't look at me," Methos said quickly. "I'm as much in the dark as you are." He slouched back into his chair, watched the Watcher watching MacLeod, a wry smile growing. "MacLeod, you're going to wear a groove in the carpet. Sit, for god's sake, you're worse than an expectant father. Joe's in good hands."

MacLeod glared at him, the calmness both a balm and an irritant, but he sat beside him. He looked up and met Evans' gaze. "Thanks," he said, "for being there for Joe. I owe you."

"No," Evans said. "I owe you. There's something you should know, Melissa Stone knows where you are."

"Yes, Joe told me."

"Wonderful," Methos muttered. "It would have been nice if someone had told me."

"But it's my fault she found out." Evans continued over him.

"I'd have made sure she knew sooner or later," MacLeod said grimly. "I want to know who the hell this crazy bitch is and why she's doing this."

"I assumed she's an immortal, after your head," Evans said cautiously. "But I couldn't find her on the data-base. She isn't a Watcher, either."

"But she's too clued up," Methos said. "She knows way too much about both sides for my peace of mind."

"You're still thinking Horton?" MacLeod said, and Methos shrugged.

"Colour me paranoid," he said. They weren't in contact, so no words came through their bond, but the implacable predator was tangible in the empathy, underscoring the knowledge that Death was never very far from the surface.

"The good thing is, since she seems to be hunting me, everyone else should be safe," MacLeod said. "Amanda shouldn't lose any more designer outfits." He took a long look at Evans. "We need to plan this. Are you with us? If so, I'll be asking you to throw your Oath out the window again."

Evans flushed and scowled. "I'm with you," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"If Stone contacts you again, tell her where I live. La Maison des Lanternes."

"Not the house!" Methos snapped. "No way!"

"She's not an immortal and I'm not going to take her head."
"You're not going to appeal to her better nature, either. She hasn't got one. This woman is not sane, MacLeod."

"Who is she?" Evans interrupted. "What does she want?"

"Like MacLeod already said," Methos replied succinctly. "Him. As for what she wants--" He broke off and shrugged. "MacLeod dead, we presume. The 'why' is the mystery. She was behind the look-alike Kuon Lo beheaded in Vienna. We're guessing she was using the poor bastard to draw MacLeod out into the open so she could try for him. When that didn't work, she killed Amanda with the same idea."

"And then she got the message I left for Dawson." Evans finished the scenario for himself. "So why hasn't she shown up in Surtainville?"

"Maybe she has," Methos said. "She's just not ready to make her move yet. If she's around and watching, then it's odds on she knows I'm here. Which is another good reason to stick to you like a second skin, MacLeod. The question is, do we use Amanda as a knife up our sleeve?"

"If necessary. But I want a face-to-face meeting with Stone. I want to find out where she's coming from."

Evans snorted. "Think she'll tell you?"

Methos gave a cynical laugh. "More likely the trick will be shutting her up," he said. "All we have to do now is find her. Or make sure she finds you."

"Finding her will be relatively easy. I'll use that portrait you made and show it around. If anyone's seen her, they'll tell me. One more thing, Evans," MacLeod went on. "This is between Stone and me, and I want to keep everyone else out of it as much as I can. I don't know how long it'll be before she makes her move, so I want you to ride herd on Joe. Make sure he stays where he is, and doesn't sign himself out ahead of time just so he can watch my back. Adam's here to do that. If they release him before she shows, then we'll get him back to Paris and you can sit on him. You okay with that?"

"Yes, no problem," Evans said without hesitating. His clear and shining determination was obvious, and MacLeod smiled. He liked this man, his stubbornness and honor, and the inquiring mind he sensed beneath it all. A mind that seethed with questions—

Methos heaved a theatrical sigh and briefly shifted. Their shoulders touched. 'Datorigni....' He moved away again. "I need coffee," he said aloud. "Anyone else want some while I'm hunting it down?"

"Sure, and something to eat, if you can manage it. And talking about Amanda," MacLeod said, "I'd better phone her. She'll be going crazy, worrying about Joe."

"Good idea," Methos agreed readily. "Give her a chance to cool down before she gets here."

MacLeod grinned. "She's still going to kill you."

"You think you'll be safe? Not a chance, MacLeod. We're both dead."

He took out his phone, but no one picked up the call at Joe’s apartment, and he ended it before the answerphone kicked in. When he tried Amanda's cell, all he got was a jaunty voicemail request to leave a message and she'd think about calling back.
Amanda, pick up, damn it! It’s m—“ He got no further.

###

Evans shifted uncomfortably. He drained the plastic cup of coffee and tossed it in the waste bin. Damn it, when did his life become so bloody complicated? MacLeod had asked and he’d agreed. Freely and without hesitation, he had agreed to break his Oath, but only to keep Dawson safe. But then, he’d already broken it when he’d warned the immortal about Carston. Not to mention when he’d swung Dawson’s cane at MacLeod’s head. His stomach clenched, and he refused the memory of how bone had crunched and given way. Instead he thought about Dawson, quickenings, and the mysterious package. But that took him straight back to the immortal again.

Duncan MacLeod had saved the man’s life. With his quickening. Nothing like that had been recorded in the Watchers’ archives, as far as Evans knew, and the implications of it were mind-boggling. Totally incomprehensible and mind-boggling. He needed to talk to Dawson, get his take on what had happened, just as soon as the man was stabilized and strong enough for them to do some high-powered brain-storming.

If he stabilized. What the hell had been so important that Dawson was willing to risk his already frail hold on life to hand over in person?

The need to warn MacLeod about Stone didn’t fit. All Dawson had to do was pick up a phone. Well, so did he, for that matter, but he pushed the thought to one side. The package was the important factor here. It had been weighty, solid, and had the definite feel of books about it.

Given that Dawson knew how sick he was, knew he hadn’t much longer to live, there was only one thing Evans could think of that a Watcher might consider valuable enough to want to pass on to his designated immortal. His journals. Private journals, kept over and above the official ones, and strictly frowned upon by the Higher Echelons.

Curiosity was a starving wolf chewing at him. He stayed in the background, watching the two immortals and the subtle shifts of expressions and body language, but mostly his gaze was on MacLeod. There was something about the man, and it fed the wolf’s hunger. Evans wanted to see those journals, needed to read—and try to understand—Dawson’s vision of MacLeod. What was so special about him that had persuaded Dawson to out the Watchers to him? It was an enigma Evans could not let go.

Another enigma was Pierson. He slouched in a relaxed sprawl that hid his height and lean strength, but the word that jumped to the forefront of Evans’ thoughts was Shieldman. Granite eyes were fixed on him, impersonal, cold and speculative, and Evans knew he didn’t have the trust of that one, regardless of what MacLeod might say or ask of him.

He held that stare with all the stubbornness in him, and wondered where the hell the mysterious parcel was.

"Amanda," MacLeod said, and once again that name immediately snagged Evans’ attention. “Pick up, damn it!” he said, impatience taut in his voice. "It's m--" Then he winced and held the phone away.

"Duncan MacLeod!" It was a banshee shriek that Evans could hear as clearly as if she was standing
just outside the room. "You are so dead!" Her voice dropped to normal volume and he heard no more.

MacLeod put the phone back to his ear. "Amanda--" he started again, then lifted up to a bellow. "Amanda! Shut up! Joe is here with me. So is Adam. Yeah, yeah, I'll tell him." He glanced across at Pierson. "She says you're dead, too. 'Manda-- Yes, he's terrified. Shaking. He'll probably be on the first flight out. Joe is fine-- 'Manda, just shut up for five seconds and let me talk! Joe is in the hospital, and they're stabilizing him now. He had another heart-attack." There was a short pause, and Evans strained his ears, even knowing he'd be able to hear nothing of the other side of this conversation. "Wait! Listen to me, Amanda." MacLeod's voice deepened a little, became warm, persuasive, and from the edge of his vision Evans saw Pierson roll his eyes and pantomime a swoon. "I need you to stay where you are for the time being. You're our ace in the hole." He paused. "I can give you two. Stone. She's either already here or on her way. If you turn up she'll almost certainly spot you and I don't want to risk that. I want her to think you're still in Paris. When we know where she is, I'll call you in and we'll pin her in a three-way trap."

"You may as well quit stalling," Pierson remarked, "and tell her where 'here' is. She'll only get into the Bichat hospital computers and find out where they sent his case notes, and end up madder than she is now."

That earned Pierson an exasperated glare. "We're in Surtainville, in Normandy," MacLeod said into the phone. "And Joe's in St. Julien's Hospital here. He's the second reason. If we haven't located her by the time he's due to leave the hospital, someone will bring him to Paris and I'll need you to watch his back until I call you in. Please, 'Manda, stay put until I need you here? We don't know for sure if she's on her own or not. She might even be working with some Watchers."

Evans tensed and leaned forward. "She can't be!" he said.

MacLeod ignored him. "I promise," he went on. "Yes, I'll keep you up to speed, or Adam will." He was smiling, now. "Yes, 'Manda," MacLeod said, a deep affection in his voice. "We love you, too."

MacLeod winced and turned to meet Pierson's wry amusement and Evans' shocked fascination.

"'Manda in a snit doesn't need a phone," he said ruefully. "I should think half of Surtainville heard her." He dropped into the armchair beside Pierson and leaned his head back against the padded rest. He looked tired and drawn, and Evans wanted to speak, offer some kind of comfort. But he couldn't think of anything that didn't sound like a trite platitude, so he kept silent. So did Pierson, and those cold eyes did not waver from Evans' face.

Time congealed, locking them into a limbo of waiting.

###

An hour later, the doctor came back to them. "Mr. Dawson is stable," he said in English. "You have five minutes, but that's it. No more visitors until tomorrow."

"What happened?" MacLeod demanded. "Was that another attack?"

"Yes, but a mild one. There was a separate problem with the equipment, unfortunately, but that had no bearing on the patient. Your uncle is sedated, and everything is under control."
Soothing words, but it took the sight of Dawson's smile to convince MacLeod that maybe the
doctor was right.

"For God's sake, Joe," he muttered, as soon as the medical staff had left the three of them alone
with the sick man. "What are you trying to do? Find out if an immortal can have heart-failure as
well?"

"Yeah, well, look on it as a kind of payback. Just one thing, Mac. That was your quickening going
home, right? Please tell me I've not been--turned--or whatever."

"You're okay, Joe," he said quietly. "You have nothing left of my quickening, and you're still
mortal."

"Thank Christ for that. But we need to talk." His gaze flicked to Methos and the immortal shook his
head.

"Don't ask me, Joe," Methos said with a shrug. "I haven't a clue what he did or how he did it. How
do you feel now?"

"Like I've been hit by a truck. But that's not new. How about you, Mac?"

"I'm okay," he said, finality in his voice, and it didn't need his sidelong glance at Evans to warn
that it wouldn't be discussed in present company.

"Yeah, well," Dawson replied, a wry smile growing, "sooner or later, we are going to talk, buddy."

"Whenever," MacLeod said, as the nurse came in to evict them. "The drugs, Joe. Why won't you
agree to them?"

"Because-- damn it! I'm not a lab-rat! It's two lots of drugs, Mac, for my heart and the cancer, and
they haven't been fully tested individually, let alone as a mix! They don't know what side-effects
the combination might have."

Being a Datorigni, even a low-level one, had to be good for something, MacLeod reasoned, and the
strange instinct that seemed to be part of the gift told him Dawson was weary with more than
physical tiredness, and--afraid. Dawson had thought he was resigned to death and on that rain-
soaked path he'd discovered he wasn't. But the man needed to find his own fire and soft words
wouldn't strike the spark from his inner steel.

"So?" MacLeod demanded. "What have you got to lose? You're already dying, so are you going to
lie there and wait for the inevitable, or get off your ass and go out on your own terms? You did it
to get to Surtainville, so you can do it again. If you haven't got the guts to risk gaining on the
quality of what life you have left, you're not the man I know!"

"Monsieur MacLeod!" barked the nurse, but she was ignored.

"Did anyone ever tell you," Dawson yelled back, trying to push himself up on his pillows, "you
have the bedside manner of Attila the Hun? Okay! If it'll get you off my back, I'll take the whole
fucking pharmacy!"

"See?" Methos stage-whispered in the nurse's ear. "When sweet reason doesn't work, throw
coherence out the window and hit the stubborn ones over the head with hard facts."

"I'll take that under advisement, Monsieur," she snapped. "Out, now."
They left in a triumphant rout, Methos heading for his car with the tunnel-visioned determination of a hungry man setting out on the hunt for a meal.

"Evans," MacLeod said on the spur of the moment and the certain knowledge that Evans was feeling adrift and more than a little guilty. "Come with us?"

The Watcher looked startled, then nodded. "Thanks," he said, and climbed into the Renault's back seat.

###

With Methos and Evans following a few steps behind him, MacLeod came into the kitchen like an elemental force and swooped Margot up in a hug, kissed her on both cheeks. "Joe's stable," he said. "They've got some new drugs they want to try on him and he's agreed to give them a chance."

Margot struggled free and tugged her apron straight. "I'm glad to hear it," she said, a smile growing. She inspected Evans with a raking glance.

"This is Rees Evans," MacLeod said quickly. "He's a friend of Joe's, got him to the hospital in time. Evans, Madame Dubosc."

Ah," she said. "The Wrexham loosehead prop. You played well against Granville, they're not an easy team to beat. Are you going to Les Pieux tomorrow, M'sieur? Flamanville has a good chance of winning."

MacLeod hid his consternation. All his thoughts had been concentrated on Dawson and Methos, and the rugby game had slipped entirely from his mind.

"I'll be there, Madame," Evans said. "How about you, Pierson?"

"Enough, for now," Margot interrupted. "The cassoulet is ready to be dished up. Duncan, give Grand-père a shout, please. Adam, lay an extra place for M'sieur Evans."

"Thank you, Madame," Evans said, as MacLeod obediently opened the back door and announced the meal with all the power of his lungs, while Methos fetched cutlery. An answering shout came back, and some minutes later, Gaspard came in.

The newcomer was introduced, and over dinner the conversation focused entirely on rugby and the away-game with Les Pieux. But every now and then MacLeod would feel Evans' eyes turn to him, studying, Watching, and didn't care. Joe had a fighting chance, now, and relief was a potent wine. He was aware, too, of Methos' love and amusement, of the affection and concern in Margot and Gaspard, and the growing liking lodged somewhere in Evans' broad chest. He wanted to reach out, hold them all within his cloak--

"Steady," Methos said quietly, a gentle touch on his soul. All conversation had stopped and he was the centre of everyone's attention, waiting for him to speak. He'd pulled in his quickening, he abruptly realized, enclosing the small group around the table. MacLeod nodded, startled and alarmed by his unconscious gathering. He let go of it, and the talk picked up again as if nothing had happened.

At the end of the meal Margot began to clear away the empty plates. "While Duncan is here," she
said, pinning Methos with her obsidian eyes, "you will eat with us as he does."

"Thank you, Madame," he said, though it was an order, not an invitation.

"Don't thank me, young man. You look like you need feeding up--skinny as a wraith--and," she went on over the hoot of laughter from MacLeod, "there's a lot of work yet to be done at the Lanterns. Or do you intend to leave it all to Duncan?"

"Madame, I wouldn't dare. I confess to being too skinny and I'll welcome being fattened up on your cooking."

"Pff!" It was a snort of disgust, but there might have been a twinkle in her eyes. Or perhaps not. "I'll take more than food to build you up if they manage to nag you onto the field."

"They won't," he said confidently. "Some things are carved in stone, Madame, and 'Adam Pierson Will Not Play Rugby' is one of them."

"That sounds like a challenge to me," MacLeod said with a sly smile.

Methos didn't dignify that with a reply. Margot, though, gave a cackle of laughter.

"You'd lose that one," she said to MacLeod, giving him a swift hug. "I know a stubborn man when I see one. You," she continued, rounding on Methos, "can call me Grand-mère, if you wish, but don't think it means I trust you or approve of you. I don't, on either count. I'm not so easily won over as some."

"Now that's a challenge," MacLeod said, grinning, and ducked as she swiped at his head.

"Your friend, M'sieur Dawson," she continued. "When he is fit enough to leave the hospital, he should come here to stay for a while. A home is a better place to recover in than a hotel."

"Thank you, Grand-mère," MacLeod said.

"And from me, as well, Grand-mère," Methos said. "On both counts." He stood up, smiling, but he studied MacLeod with unhidden concern. "Thanks as well for a superb meal. MacLeod, you look like death warmed over and you've got a game to play tomorrow. I'll take the night-watch for tonight, and you can catch up on your sleep. Come on, Evans, I'll drive you back to pick up your car."

###

Dawson lay in bed staring at the ceiling and listening to the heart monitor bleeping away. The ICU staff weren't happy about his condition, while he was just pleased to still be around. He closed his eyes. He was bone-weary, and a dull ache lodged in his chest, but that was all. This morning, he'd thought he was dead. From now on, every minute was a bonus. He was alive for a while longer, and his friends were close by. Only Amanda was missing, though when she did turn up, she'd probably be as mad as a wet cat.

But he felt...odd...and he couldn't pinpoint it. It was a strong possibility that MacLeod was the root cause of it, and of his survival, but where that left him right now, he didn't know. The monitor's voice speeded up, the over-worked collection of muscles forcing blood through narrowed and
brittle plumbing. Something was going to give, he knew it.

Change the subject, think calming thoughts while the automatic drip-feed measured the tranquilizer into his system, steadying his heartbeat. He closed his eyes and ran through some songs in his head.

Words and music, as always, took Dawson to another level. Instinctively his fingers flexed as if around the neck of a guitar, finding the frets, while the other hand coaxed music from the strings: playing air-guitar like a teenage wannabe.

His fingers responded, true to his will and more supple than they'd been for years.

Dawson opened his eyes and lifted his hands, staring at them. Was it his imagination or were his knuckles less swollen? He made a fist, clenched it hard. The familiar dull ache started, but it didn’t flare to the intensity it had before. He flexed his fingers, watched tendons slide smoothly over bones, and emotion choked his throat.

He had his music back.

They wouldn't be starting him on the new drugs until tomorrow, so it had to MacLeod's quickening that had done it. No matter what happened with the medications and his damaged heart and lungs, for this gift alone he would be in the immortal's debt for the rest of his life, regardless of how short that might be.
Chapter 26

The parcel was books. Evans had felt their hard outlines when he'd sat in the back of Pierson's car, trying not to look at the blood-stained walking stick. The plastic wrapping had been taped together, but it had sat in a puddle in torrential rain for a while, and the tape had begun to lift. Dawson's private journals, had to be. With surreptitious care, Evans had peeled back enough strips to free up a corner and ease out one of the books, then he'd resealed the parcel as best he could and prayed that no one would notice its slightly different shape.

Now that book was burning a hole in his coat pocket. He shot a glance at the raptor's profile, features briefly illuminated by the lights of a passing car, and wondered how he could get his hands on the rest of the books.

"Why haven't you reported MacLeod?" Pierson asked suddenly. There was no aggression in his tone, just a casual curiosity, but still Evans' color rise.

"Because," he said with a dismissive shrug. "I wasn't sure it was him. After all, he was dead, wasn't he?"

"Now you know he's the genuine article, what's the agenda?"

"Haven't got one. Except find some answers. What's the story with Melissa Stone, and who was the poor bastard pretending to be MacLeod?"

"That's what we'd like to know. The kid was Robert Chrétien. Son of an immortal called Quinn Chrétien, you can check Dad out in the archives."

"And you haven't? Are you trying to tell me you didn't leave yourself a way into the database when you quit the Watchers?"

"Did anyone ever tell you, you have a suspicious mind?" Pierson said in an annoying drawl. "It's useful to know who's about and what their MO is. And before you start hurling accusations, I don't hunt, I run. Very fast and away from people with sharp blades and homicidal intentions. Mostly," he added darkly. "But I can make exceptions to the Pierson Rules of Survival." For a moment Evans wondered if that was a threat. Then he remembered exactly how few kills were tallied against Adam Pierson's name. "Two exceptions," the immortal continued. "Stone and Carston."

"So you don't know what this woman has against MacLeod?"

"Haven't a clue, and neither has he. I don't suppose you can shed any light on it, can you?"

"Me?" Evans stared at him blankly. Then he heard the unspoken question. "No!" he snapped. "I'm not with her, or Carston--or any Watcher sub-group!"

"I hope that's the truth. Or you'll be Exception Number Three. The MacLeod head is staying on the MacLeod shoulders."

"So he can be the One?" he demanded.

"Nope. So there'll never be a One while we live. Go and check through the archives again, Evans. Study them. Look for patterns. By eliminating immortals, Horton could have come close to causing what he most wanted to avoid. Think about it."
The car came to a halt, and with a jolt Evans realised they were back in the hospital parking lot. He climbed out, questions and what ifs rioting through his mind, and hunting for words to say to this dangerous enigma. He hadn't even mentioned the one right at the top of the list--MacLeod's quickening in Joe Dawson--

"Evans," Pierson said again, and his hard-planed features softened into a surprisingly charming smile. "Thanks for Joe."

"I didn't do much," he said. Except break MacLeod's skull. "Uh, what about Joe's things?"

"What things?"

"His stuff in his hotel room, his walking stick and I think he had a parcel with him."

"Damn. I'd forgotten about that. No, I'll take care of them." Pierson reached into the back of his car and snagged the package of books. As he lifted it, the soaked tape gave way and the books slid free of their plastic wrapping to scatter on the floor between the seats. "Bloody hell. Never mind those, Evans. Just pay off his room and pack his gear, and you can either bring them to the boatyard or the farmhouse. Grand-mère Margot will look after them until we need to get him back to Paris."

"Okay," Evans said, hiding his disappointment. Well, it was worth a try, and at least he'd managed to get hold of one of the books. "G'night."

He didn't watch Pierson drive away, just went straight to his car and got in. Thanks to several helpings of a truly wonderful cassoulet followed by apple pie and fresh cream, he wasn't hungry. All he wanted was his room, a gallon of coffee and time to read what he prayed would turn out to be an illicit journal, and not part of a collection of borrowed books being returned to their rightful owner.

###

With skilful use of her gossip circuit, it hadn't taken Melissa long to discover Duncan's usual haunts and where he was living. Sitting in the Fleurie Auberge, sipping excellent coffee, with hot sweet croissants for a mid-morning snack, Melissa wrote out a list of those haunts and studied it with a thoughtful frown. Given that she'd managed it with very little effort, how come Rees Evans had singularly failed to find out little more than where Duncan worked? Had the Watcher resumed his interrupted vacation, or was he still in the area?

She considered it. No, he'd moved on. There had been a certain note in his voice, as of a man only too eager to pass the problem on to someone else. 'I intend to forget I ever saw him.' Or was he protesting too much?

Melissa's frown deepened. Perhaps she ought to contact him again and arrange a meeting, ostensibly to compare notes, and eliminate him. On the other hand, he was Research, not Field, and Matthew had always been a little scathing about those who did nothing but sit on chairs all day and compile notes they could pontificate about, untouched by the bloodstained reality of immortal lives. No. More likely, he was not protesting so much as reacting to the panic that efficient killers with sharp blades could engender.

That settled to her satisfaction, Melissa finished her morning break, and continued her exploration of Duncan's world, secure in the knowledge he was at the boatyard. She took some leisurely drives
around the countryside until she located the Dubosc farmhouse. It was a pretty place, she decided, set amongst its orchards. It would be even prettier if the weather wasn't appallingly wet. It seemed an awfully big place for two old people to run on their own, but then, she acknowledged, she knew nothing about farming in general and fruit-farming in particular. Perhaps Duncan helped them out when he wasn't at the boatyard or the new house. If that was the case, they'd miss him when he was dead.

Adam's whereabouts were equally important, and she gave them due consideration.

There was, of course, no way of knowing if Adam had merely paid a flying visit and was on his way back to Paris, or if he was staying in the area. Melissa knew his car, thanks to that fortuitous visit to the bookshop with those silly children: a black Renault Megane. To her relief, he wasn't at the farm; and no sign of his car in the yard, nor parked beside the barns. She was able to dawdle past a few times, familiarize herself with the layout of house, outbuildings, and yard as best she could from the road. Then she drove on towards the sea and the granite cliffs of the Cap de Flamanville.

Melissa left her car in the Sémaphore's parking lot, and took a stroll along the footpath, a camera slung around her neck, doing her best to look like a tourist. A half-drowned, chilled-to-the-bone tourist. She was beginning to dislike Normandy.

There was only one house before the path narrowed down much for a car, and she found it disappointing. The garden walls were far too high for her to look over, and the wrought iron gate gave a view onto a screen of overgrown flowerbeds that masked the ground floor of the house from view.

Although no place-name showed anywhere, it had to be La Maison Des Lanternes, because three tall things that looked like fancy street-lamps rose out of the dead foliage. Footprints in mud and scuffed leaves told her that people had been walking in and out of those gates, but she saw no sign of recent tire tracks. Green shutters were fastened back against the white walls, and the blank windows stared at her like hostile eyes.

Melissa shivered. Surely Duncan wasn't crazy enough to want to live in such a cold, unwelcoming place? But more to the point, there was no sign of life, no lights, no movement, so should she take a chance? Melissa hesitated. The gates weren't padlocked. She could slip through and explore, but a quick check of her watch decided her against it. The time was approaching one o'clock, and there was a chance Duncan might come home to eat. She could probably risk having her own lunch at the Sémaphore, though. Rain trickled down her neck, prompting Melissa to kill that particular plan at once. First she'd go back to her hotel for a hot shower and change of clothes.

After lunch, Melissa intended to check out the penultimate place on her list, the Flamanville Rugby Clubhouse and field. Sometime over the next few days she'd pay a brief visit to St Helier and investigate Jack Carston and his stamping ground. If he was going to be a tool, then she needed to learn all she could about him, and what made him tick.

When she had all her information, she'd decide on where and when the final act would be played out.

It hit Melissa then, that she was hunting an immortal. Not just tracking their movements on the database and setting them up for the next moves in her game, but hunting. It gave her an invigorating thrill, like nothing she'd felt before. Like her quarry, she was a predator, a killer, and she had the advantage. He couldn't sense her approach. He'd look at her and think her a nonentity, an insignificant nobody. By the time he discovered his mistake, it would be far too late.
Melissa scolded herself silently. It would not do to become overconfident, not at this late stage in her quest. She would have to make painstakingly sure she'd covered all eventualities, that no mistakes were made.

But a little later, after a shower and dry clothes, Melissa discovered one eventuality she hadn't covered. A routine check on Joseph's case notes told her he'd signed himself out of the Bichat Hospital in the night.

Shocked, she stared at the screen in disbelief, then phoned the Le Blues bar. The response she got from the barman did nothing to reassure her. "Monsieur Dawson," the cheerful voice told her, "is still in the hospital, but we expect him home within the hour. If you would leave your name and phone number, Madame, Monsieur will return your call as soon as he's--" Melissa cut the call before he finished speaking.

"Joseph Dawson," she said aloud, resenting the quaver in her voice, "you are beginning to annoy me." Why would he leave the hospital in the middle of the night? There was only one reason she could think of that would have caused him to do that. Duncan. Resolutely she won back her self-control. If she was right, then Joseph would be on his way to Surtainville, and she wasn't ready for him to be here.

###

Evans closed the door and leaned against it, took the book out of his pocket and opened it at random.

He let out his breath in a long, slow sigh. A neat scrawl marched in regular lines across each page, paragraphs occasionally broken by dates.

Eyes on the page, Evans groped for the bed and sat down.

'So how will he handle this? An old flame turning up, old being the key word. Went back and read the original reports, and they didn't tell me much more than the bare facts. I want to know more, fuck it, like what was going through his head when he went in for the kid, when he realised LP had taken those photos. I've known immortals kill before now to keep their anonymity, and here he was, about to be splashed all over the front pages. Then not only did he not silence her, he fell for her and encouraged her career. And she dumped him, God knows why. His Watcher recorded the guy was gutted.

Now she shows up again. How the fuck will he explain this to T? If he hurts that girl, I swear I'll take his head myself.

Okay, I know we don't interfere, don't get involved, but that's so fucking hard when it's people like DM and T. More than the others I've Watched, I want to know what goes on inside his head. I want to know what motivates him. The Chronicles can only give a surface view of the man, enough to fuel speculation, and I'm no psychoanalyst. All I can go on is my gut reaction. I like this guy. Okay, I could kick his ass from here to next week sometimes, but hey, who's perfect? I like what I see. Mostly. T has made a difference to him, that's for sure.

He's--settled--with her, at peace in a way I haven't seen in him before. And the way he looks at her, like the whole world revolves around the axis of TN.
Can't say I blame him. She's a very special lady. But how will she handle LP? Will she see herself? Now I come to think about it, they have something in common--apart from DM--those incredible talent of theirs. But for me, T has the edge. I've looked at the photos and I've studied the sculptures. Maybe it's the different mediums they've chosen to worth with, but T's stuff is alive, like she puts something of herself into everything she creates. LP's is gripping, moving, but she's distant from it, somehow. Uninvolved. Recording. Like a Watcher. It was back then, when they were together, and it is now.'

Evans frowned. T was obviously Tessa Noel, but who was this LP woman? The Watchers database gave him the answer. Linda Plager. He read the archived reports of MacLeod's two involvements with the photographer. Then he went back to Dawson's private chronicle for his take on them. It made fascinating reading.

'Gregor is such a jerk, and if he doesn't get his hooks out of young Ryan, MacLeod is going to have his head. The guy is a suicide waiting to happen and the way he's going, he could get Ryan killed.

###

Well, MacLeod's just done it again. He fought Gregor, wiped the floor with him, and didn't take his fucking head! Guess that confirms something I've suspected for a while now. Duncan MacLeod may follow the Rules of the Game, but he's no Game player, even if he's terrified the crap out of Gregor. Wish there were more like him. Maybe there are, men and women living quiet lives away from the Game. Like DM, like GC--has that woman ever taken a head? We sure as hell don't have a record of it if she has.

###

LP is dead. DM was with her, T was waiting outside for him. His face said it all, poor bastard. He's hurting. I wonder if he told LP who he is? Caught a glimpse of T's face as she hugged him. She knows that would be her in there, forty, fifty years down the line, and with no one for DM to share his grief with. No question in my mind he'd still be with her, if he manages to keep his neck intact.

Immortality sucks. Who the fuck wants it?'

Slowly, Evans closed the book. Not a Game player. And who was GC? Dawson had said something about immortals who'd never taken a head, didn't carry a sword. Then Pierson's words came back to him: "So there'll never be a One while we live--check the archives--look for patterns."

It may not have been meant as a challenge, but Evans took it as one. Of course, any pattern wouldn't be quickly found. It'd take many hours, probably days, of reading, collating, and interpreting, things he was very good at.

"Okay," he said aloud. But first he'd read this journal, then return it to its author. He kicked off his shoes, made himself comfortable on the bed, and opened the book at the first page.
Methos' night had been uneventful, boring and lonely. Although the weather had closed in with heavy swaths of fog drifting in from the Channel, no smugglers took advantage of it. Still, it had given him plenty of time to assess the current situation.

Carston and Stone were, naturally, at the forefront, but Rees Evans was up there as a close contender. Methos had gathered up the journals to rewrap them, and since he knew as well as Dawson how many there’d been, it was no great feat to discover one was missing. A double check showed it wasn’t in the car, which left only a light-fingered Watcher.

Rees Evans, Methos decided, was becoming a liability. It would be interesting to see how he'd wriggle out from under this particular pile of shit, when the missing book had been retrieved.

Between the three fronts, two of which were certainly hostile, and the third possibly, the House of the Lanterns needed some more esoteric security measures. One man sitting on his frostbitten arse among the rocks all night was simply not enough. Especially when that one man had far better things to do with his nights and his lover than freeze his assets.

There’d be no time to locate and buy the necessary items, but Methos was no slouch at improvising gadgetry. By the time morning came, he had the device planned out in his head.

As soon as the stores were open, Methos strolled round a couple of electronics specialists and a DIY superstore, buying the necessary ingredients. His homemade security system would be pretty basic, but enough to let whoever was in the house know when someone set foot on the cliff-stair. For the long-term, he had a couple of very useful and discreet contacts.

Of course, this was something MacLeod should have done right from the start of his renovations, but hadn't. Given that the man used to run a highly lucrative antiques business, as well as having a sought-after head, Methos would have assumed security alarms and detectors would be right at the top of his Things To Do list.

It took longer than he'd anticipated, and by the time Methos' early warning system was assembled and in place, he knew he wouldn't make the kick-off in Les Pieux. Not if he wanted to visit Dawson as well.

The decision wasn't hard to make. Methos drove to the hospital.

Getting in to see Dawson outside of visiting hours was not as difficult as it might have been. The Watcher was still in his ICU room and still wired up to the life-support, but his condition looked to have improved a little to Methos' eyes.

"MacLeod will be along later today," he said by way of greeting. "He couldn't get out of the rugby game this morning."
"Connor played rugby," Dawson offered, smiling. "You found Stone yet?"

Methos shook his head. "Not yet, but we'll be working on it. I've got that picture, remember. We'll print it off at Gervais' office and do some quiet snooping."

"You gonna tell me what else is going down here?"

"As in?" Methos inquired, voice bland.

"Where does Jack Carston fit into all this? Evans mentioned him when he phoned me, but that's it. Everyone's been freaking out over Stone, and the fucking immortal's been forgotten, it seems like!"

"Hardly," Methos snapped. "The man's a pain in the arse! He's yet another twist to the tangle MacLeod's making of his life here!" He gave Dawson an acerbic and concise account of Carston's activities, and the involvement of the Dubocs, the Bouvins and the rest, including Duncan MacLeod. "They're good people, Joe," he finished. "I think you'll like them. Margot Dubosc says you're to convalesce with them, not your hotel when you get out of here."

"That's great. So where is Carston now?"

"In St. Helier, according to his Watcher's report. It's where his boats are that's the question."

"Yeah, if I had my laptop--"

"No. We've got a lookout point on the cliffs."

"Huh. Has Evans reported Mac yet?"

"Not so far. He's playing to the Dawson Rule Book at the moment. MacLeod is inclined to trust him. I'm not."

"That figures. Methos, about what Mac did--"

"Joe, I'm as confounded as you are," he said frankly. "It should have been impossible."

"So why did it work? If immortals could learn to--"

"Die?" Methos cut in harshly. "That's the only thing I could come up with, that MacLeod was killed while he was pouring his life-force into you. The connection was forcibly broken, leaving some of that energy behind."

"Christ!" Dawson muttered. "The implications of that--"

"Are enough to give you a relapse," Methos interrupted, "so don't go there."

"Yeah," Dawson said grimly. "I don't think I'll be recording that in any journal, official or otherwise."

"Talking of journals," Methos said, "I've got them safe and sound." Well, all but one, and he was pretty sure who had that. But Dawson didn't need to know it in his present state of health. "And your cane."

"I brought the books for Mac." Dawson was looking tired and drawn again, and Methos knew he'd stayed long enough.

"He says they're yours." He smiled. "Seeing that you're staying around."
Dawson's smile was rueful. "Damn-right," he said, and tried to swallow a yawn. "Sorry, it's the drugs. Doc said they'd probably make me sleep a lot at first...."

"See you later," Methos said quietly, and laid his hand briefly on Dawson's shoulder.

"Tell Mac...."

"Yes?" But Dawson was asleep.

###

The game had started about half an hour ago, and the home team had three points on the board. Flamanville still had to score. MacLeod's Presence spread a welcoming warmth, and under it was enjoyment and stubborn resolve focused on the game.

Hands in his pockets, collar turned up against the wind, Methos strolled towards the narrow strip of crowd along the touchline, heading for the copper-bright beacon of Evans' hair. It was time they had a heart to heart chat about this and that.

"How's it going?" Methos said, easing into a place beside the Watcher.

"Patchy," Evans said. "Les Pieux are playing it close, trying to contain our lads. We're trying to open it out, let the wings use their legs." He paused. "Didn't think you'd be here."

"Why not?" Methos demanded cheerfully. "I'm as happy as the next man to watch two gangs of maniacs roll around in the muck."

"From what I can gather, you're not popular. There are some very odd rumors going the rounds. MacLeod's had to take a lot of verbal stick from the opposition, and some elements in the crowd."

Methos shrugged. He wasn't surprised. After all, MacLeod had told Gervais, who had told the rest of the boatyard crew, who had told their respective wives and probably parents, who had told their friends--all in the strictest confidence, of course. Consequently they had been successfully outed to most of Surtainville and its surrounds within a very short time. He hadn't missed the way the people here were edging away, leaving him in a small exclusion zone. Soon Evans was the only one standing close. "Life's a bitch," he drawled. "I hope he hasn't let it rattle him."

"He hasn't, but some of the others aren't so--" He broke off as MacLeod disappeared under three heavy bodies. "Ouch," he said over the mass groan from the Flamanville supporters around them. "They've been doing a lot of that, to both wingers. MacLeod's had a couple of nasty shoeings, and Matthieu's beginning to get frustrated. Fists could fly."

The referee's whistle blew, and the man called for a scrum. MacLeod got to his feet, the number 14 on his back almost unreadable under mud and grass-stains, and moved wide of the scrum formations being set up not far from the touchline. On the ref's signal, the front rows came together with a collective visceral grunt, and Methos smiled. There was something satisfyingly primitive about rugby.

The ball spun out between the pistoning legs and the Flamanville scrumhalf scooped it up. He hurled it on to MacLeod, who caught it and took off on a fast jinking run. He didn't get far. To howls from the crowd, his opposite number slammed into him, but couldn't prevent him throwing
the ball to Matthieu. Meantime Jean-Michel had sprinted down the centre of the field, and Matthieu sent a high pass rocketing towards his brother. Jean-Michel leaped and snatched it out of the air, and drove towards the opposition's line.

Two men pulled him off his feet and for a few seconds the ball rolled free. Gervais grabbed it and powered forward, using his solid bulk to good effect, fending off attackers with a single-minded determination. A mass tackle brought him down in a sliding fall just in front of the goal posts, but he kept control of the ball and his momentum carried him over the line for a try. Five points went up on the scoreboard, to the raucous appreciation of the visiting supporters.

"Good teamwork," Evans said, grinning. "They play fast, open rugby, when they get a chance. About these rumors," he went on, "Patric Theroux's been very busy. That's him, over there with the blond giant. Don't know what he thinks it'll accomplish, mind you."

"Dissention in the ranks," Methos said. "And given that MacLeod is pretty efficient in the combat department, isolate him, maybe have him hounded out?"

"Sounds pretty lame to me. You'd think he'd know his own townsfolk better than that. MacLeod would have to commit a worse sin than screwing an Englishman before they'd ostracize him." He paused as Thierry kicked for goal, converting the try for another two points. "All Theroux's done is make a lot of people even madder at himself."

"Sooner or later, it'll be payback time," Methos said easily. "We can wait."

"Ah-huh." Evans turned his head, gave him a steady look. "Are they true?"

Methos smiled. "Oh, yes," he drawled, voice acidic. "Of course they are. Duncan MacLeod, well-known Stud and Ladies' Man of the Western World--who could doubt it? For God's sake be careful how you pass that bit of gossip on to Joe, he might have a relapse, laughing." The sarcasm didn't gain him an advantage.

Evans nodded. "That's what I thought," he said obliquely. "It's not my place to say anything. Dawson won't hear it from me."

"Meaning?"

"Just what I said. If you don't want Dawson to know, you'll need to play it more carefully."

"Is that so?" Methos did nothing to keep the dangerous sibilance from his voice, but the Watcher didn't flinch.

"You're in each other's space," he said quietly. "I saw it at the hospital, when we were waiting to go back in to Dawson. Then there's what Margot Dubosc said to you, and now these rumors Theroux's spreading. It adds up."

"God defend me from intuitive Celts," he sighed.

"Better He defends you from Amanda," Evans said. "I've checked Carston's movements. According to his Watcher he's in St. Helier, hasn't left the place for days. The only one of his boats in the harbor is the Danae, a small racing yacht, and she's in the middle of a refit. Or am I telling you things you already know?"

"Why are you telling me at all?"

"Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb," Evans said with a shrug that could almost have been
Gallic. "Besides, Dawson will be online as soon as he can get his hands on his computer, and he'll pass on whatever he finds out, so what do I gain by keeping quiet? Only time."

Gaspard Dubosc stepped into the space at Methos' other side, effectively silencing both men. "Adam," Gaspard said with a friendly nod. "Glad you could make it. How's M'sieur Dawson?"

"Recovering, Grand-père," Methos answered. "I passed on Grand-mère's invitation, and he sends his thanks. It'll be a while before he's fit enough to leave the hospital, though."

"Of course. How soon before we see you out there on the field, hmm?"

Methos snorted, and Evans grinned at him. "Don't hold your breath, Grand-père," Methos said. "It isn't going to happen."

"Yves was talking fullback for you. Or moving Matthieu to fullback and you taking the wing opposite Duncan."

"No way! Those two work well together--and I am not playing rugby." He watched Theroux over Gaspard's head, fixing the man's face in his memory.

"The other guy is Sven Anders," Evans said quietly. "I think you'll find that despite the insults being yelled, most of our crowd are with MacLeod, not Theroux."

"Damn right," Gaspard said, a growl in his voice.

"Our crowd?" Methos cocked an eyebrow at Evans, who flushed.

"Don't push your luck, boyo," the Watcher snapped.

At that moment Theroux turned his head, looked straight at Methos. The man jeered, his harsh shout rising above the general hub-bub. Methos couldn't make out the words. He didn't need to hear to know it was an insult. Theroux pointed at him, called out something, and heads swiveled to stare.

"What the hell does he expect me to do?" He snorted. "Hit him with my handbag?"


The simple gesture seemed to take the man by surprise. His jaw sagged, then snapped shut in a snarl, while the Flamanville crowd hooted with glee. To Methos' bemused delight, Theroux was suddenly faced with a barrage of blown kisses and cooing suggestions to take himself and Anders off somewhere and propagate their sub-species. Methos was no longer in isolation. Gaspard and several others pounded him on the back as if he'd just scored a major victory.

It couldn't be that simple, could it? Surely not? Then he remembered a particular trait in the French character. You can get away with almost anything, as long as you do it with style and panache. It was the first step on the way to acceptance.

"Anyway," Evans was saying, "I'm glad you turned up. I've got something of Joe's."

"You have?" Methos drawled, all his attention abruptly locked on the Watcher.

"Yes." Evans took a smallish package out of his pocket, neatly wrapped in brown paper. "One of his journals. I borrowed it. For research. Private research," he added. "It won't be going anywhere
It wasn't often that Methos found himself lost for words, but the bold effrontery of the Watcher's move left him momentarily speechless. "Consider yourself lucky, Evans," he said, taking the parcel. Maybe there were hidden depths in this man. "Sheer brass neck has probably saved your hide. This time. Did you find out what you wanted to know?" he added acidly

"Some of it. Enough."

"And?"

"He's a bloody good winger. I think the only time he and Matthieu have stopped running in this game is when they've been underneath a heap of bodies."

Methos studied Evans' rugged, determined features, and knew he wouldn't get an answer but had to ask. He'd give a lot right now for some of MacLeod's Datorigni insight. "Do we have an understanding?" he asked coolly.

The Watcher didn't reply. He just shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention back to the mayhem on the muddy field.
By the time the final whistle blew at the end of an untidy, stubbornly fought game, no more points had been added by either side, and the visitors had won. Leg-weary and bruised, MacLeod followed the team back to the locker-room. The last time he'd played, he'd been included in the shared backslaps and bear-hugs as a matter of course. This time, there were cautious pats on the shoulders for him from Yves, Matthieu and Thierry, and no one else would meet his eyes.

"Not bad," Yves said, "in spite of Anders screaming for them to stamp on your knee. How is it?"

"Okay," MacLeod said quietly. The suspicion and caution emanating from the most of the team were coming very close to outright rejection. But he had never expected it to be easy for them to accept him and Methos as a couple. He peeled off his mud-caked shirt and turned away, to be stopped by Thierry's hand on his arm.

"You've got boot-prints on your back so clear I can count every cleat," the man said. "Go and soak in the bath and afterwards I'll rub in the liniment."

The collective wariness from those already in the communal bath became consternation, and MacLeod shook his head. "No," he said, "it'll be fine. Adam can see to it." He finished stripping and walked to the shower instead, feeling the team's reactions transform to an almost guilty relief.

The rush of warm water over his skin was a welcome distraction. MacLeod closed his eyes and lifted his face to the spray, glad that Methos was too far away for their Presences to overlap. Even prepared for their responses, the pain was sharp and he knew he couldn't hide it from his lover. Without that connection he didn't have to try. He held on to it, using it as a shield against their emotions, and was startled when a hand poked him on the arm.

"Here," said Matthieu, holding out a soapy sponge. A sheepishly wry grin curved the man's mouth in unspoken apology. "I'll wash your back if you'll wash mine. I don't think my Simone or your Adam will kill us."

"Thanks," MacLeod said. "But no, thanks." He smiled to take away the edge of his refusal, and stepped out of the water. He gave himself a perfunctory toweling and dressed. "Gervais, can I use the printer at the office? There's something I need to run off."

"Yes, sure," Gervais said quickly. "Duncan--"

"Thanks. Catch you later."

###

"I don't understand." Jean-Michel snapped at his brother as MacLeod left the locker-room. "Why are you so easy with Sensei being a queer? It's wrong!" Matthieu gave a snort of disgust and rounded on him.

"So what would you do?" Yves cut in before Matthieu could speak. "Kick him out? Drive him away from here?"
"No! He's family!" Jean-Michel said indignantly. "But we could get rid of Pierson."

"How? Tell him to leave? Do you think he would, just because you said so? And if he did, what would Duncan do then? Stay here or go with him?"

"He has a home here!"

"There is an old and trite saying," Yves said. "Home is where the heart is, and what I've just seen here doesn't look much like a family to me."

Jean-Michel grunted and ignored him, took two strides to stand in Matthieu's space, glaring up at the younger man like a bull-dog facing down a wolfhound. "You haven't answered my question," he said, an aggressive jut to his chin.

"I don't have to," Matthieu snapped, hands closing into fists. "You already said it. He's family."

Voices rose, shouting him down. Most of the team had an opinion, it seemed, and all of those opinions were against Pierson. Though Gervais couldn't be sure if that was because the man was gay or English. Or both.

"My mother had an older sister," Yves interrupted loudly, harsh voice carrying through the outbreak. Quietness spread, broken only by the dripping shower-head. "In the last war, the Germans were all over here. When my mother was ten, Béatrice met Dieter Brandt. He was a corporal in a tank regiment." The words were staccato, as if they came with difficulty. "They wanted to get married. The family was horrified, told her she had a choice, him or them. She chose him and they threw her out.

"After the war she came back to see them, asking for a reconciliation. Her parents spat in her face and told her she was a traitor and might as well be dead. She left and never came back." He was silent for a brief moment, eyes distant, looking back, and no one spoke. "Aunt Béatrice and my mother were very close. They kept in touch and once a year, or when they could both afford it, they'd meet in Paris. Mother would take us kids, Aunt Béatrice would bring hers.

"My grandparents found out and never spoke to us again. Not to my mother, not to us children. Dieter Brandt was a good man. My family was torn apart by hatred and blind bigotry. I won't stand silent and watch it happen here. Adam Pierson is Duncan's choice, and if you call yourself Duncan's family and friends, that should be the end of it." It was the longest speech any of them had heard from the taciturn Yves, and it had impact.

"It's hardly the same thing!" Jean-Michel protested into the uncomfortable silence. "Is it? I mean, Pierson hasn't invaded us, killed thousands of us--"

"That isn't the point," Matthieu said over him. "I'm with the Sensei, and I don't give a flying fuck what you make of it, or what names you want to call him or me. He's my friend, come hell or high water, and if we let this split us up, family and team, then as well as hurting a man who's been nothing but loyal to us--and risked his neck fighting our enemies--we're playing right into Theroux's hands."

"Shit!" Jean-Michel groaned. "I never thought of that."

"You," Matthieu bit back, "never think!"

"Enough!" Yves bellowed.

"More than enough," Gervais growled, red-faced and shamed sullen. "I'm going after him."
"Leave it, Boss," Thierry counseled. "Give him a bit of space. Tomorrow we'll all be calmer."

"Can't. Yves and Matthieu are right and I have some bridges to mend. Or try to. Besides," he went on, refusing to meet anyone's gaze, "Madeleine likes Pierson."

"So does Simone," Matthieu said swiftly.

"And Marie." Thierry sighed.

"And Eloise." Yves' smile was grim. "We all heard Margot Dubosc call him by his first name the other evening, even if it came hard to her."

"Gervais," Thierry said, "I'm coming with you."

"Me, too," said Matthieu.

"Where are we going?" Jean-Michel muttered.

"I don't know about the others, but I'm off to the boatyard to collect Duncan and Pierson," his brother said impatiently. "Then to get in a few drinks. You never listen, either!"

"Don't start!" Gervais barked. He dried himself off, dressed quickly, and hurried out to his car. MacLeod was long gone, and so was most of the crowd. Theroux wasn't around either, which was a disappointment. Gervais had an almost overwhelming need to punch someone and Patric Theroux was the ideal candidate.

###

Methos lifted the sheet of paper off the print-tray and studied it with narrowed eyes. "It's a pretty damned good likeness, if I say so myself," he announced.

"I hope so," MacLeod said. "Second-hand memories might not be that accurate." His skepticism came through the link and Methos gave him an affectionate smile.

"These are," he said. "Are you ready to talk about it now?"

"Talk about--?" Eyes as dark and unreadable as peat-water gazed at him.

"Your team won the game. But you wanted to come straight here instead of heading back to Le Sémaphore to celebrate, like Gaspard expected. This could have waited."

"I want her out of our lives."

"You and me both, but don't pretend you're not hurting because--"

"I'm not pretending anything," MacLeod interrupted. "It'll be a while before they all come round. Melissa Stone is too much of an unknown quantity to risk losing any advantage we might have."

"I won't argue with that," Methos said, then paused. Through the office window he could see four cars following a motorcycle through the gates. Time to man the barricades? "Company," he said cheerfully. "How many copies are you making? Two each?"
"That should cover it," MacLeod said. "One to show around and one to replace it when it gets dog-eared. Hi," he added as Gervais Dubosc came in, followed closely by the rest of his workforce. Methos got friendly grins from Matthieu and Thierry, embarrassed nods from the others.

There was an uncomfortable silence, and Methos was in no hurry to break it. Matthieu and Thierry stared at their boss until he caved under the pressure.

"I, uh, came to remind you both we're all heading for Le Sémaphore for some drinks and a meal," Gervais said awkwardly. "The rest of the team's already there."

"Thanks," Methos said, knowing MacLeod was about to refuse. "We'll be along."

"Who's she?" Thierry asked, picking up one of the prints. "Handsome woman," he added appreciatively. "A relative?"

"No," MacLeod answered. "She's looking for me."

"Ah," said Matthieu, nudging Methos in the ribs. "An ex-girlfriend. You could have some competition, M'sieur Pierson."

"Fat chance," Methos smiled, pouring mugs of coffee and handing them around. "And the name's Adam." It was a deliberate overture of friendship on his part, as well as a challenge, and he waited for their reaction.

"Matthieu," said the younger Bouvin without hesitation. "Jean-Michel," he went on not waiting for sanction from the others. "Yves, Thierry and Gervais. So who is she?"

"No idea," MacLeod said, and some of the tension eased from their link. "She's American, and that's all we know about her for sure. Adam says she was asking around where I used to live in Paris, and Joe had come to tell me she'd found out I'm here and was on her way. He was pretty damn sure she wasn't a friend."

"If she isn't an old flame out to claim you back from Adam," Matthieu said, frowning. "Who is she and what does she want?"

"That's why MacLeod and I are going to show these around and find out if anyone remembers seeing her," Methos said.

"Then you're the last one who should be asking the questions," Thierry said. "If she's here, it'll be obvious you're onto her. I'll have a word with Marie. She'll pass it round her cronies. Better run off a few more."

"I bet I know who she is," Jean-Michel said suddenly. "I'll put money on her working for Carston, checking out Sensei's background." MacLeod's shock rode the link and Methos might have been tempted to laugh if there hadn't been a rising tide of anger following it.

"Double it," Yves said. "Eloise will be glad to do the same."

"So will Madeleine," Gervais' expression lightened. "Good idea to get the Distaff Mafia on the case."

"No, it isn't," MacLeod snapped. "If this woman is working for Carston, she could be dangerous!"

Jean-Michel snickered. "So can Eloise. Hey, Matthieu, remember when she took after us with her skillet?"
"No!" MacLeod drew himself up, and Methos felt the rush of energy as he gathered will and quickening, drawing all eyes. "No. You can't do it. I won't have them put themselves in danger on my account." But a Datorigni can't compel, no matter how strong he was and how much he might want to, and MacLeod was nowhere near as powerful as Darius had been.

"Don't worry," Thierry said, dropping an arm over MacLeod's shoulders. "We'll warn them, tell them to be subtle, okay?"

"It's not okay!" MacLeod growled, and his anger scorched through their connection, making Methos glad he wasn’t on the receiving end of it, this time. Jean-Michel was, and his expression showed his consternation.

"What harm can they come to, asking their friends about a foreign stranger, hmm?" Thierry demanded, smiling. "This Madame Stone won't know a thing about it. But we'll explain the situation, and let them decide what they want to do."

"At least they'll be doing something," Jean-Michel muttered, refusing to meet MacLeod's accusing eyes. "Which is more than we are. Fuck it! I wish there was some way we could carry the war to Carston!"

"We will be," Gervais said. "The weather is due to change, and as soon as the Halcyon shows we'll be waiting. The next seventy-two hours should see this coming to a head."

"Can't happen soon enough for me," Jean-Michel said. "I want to get my hands on Theroux. But right now I am so hungry I could eat my boots and I need a beer. Are we going to Le Sémaphore or not?"

"We're going," Yves said. "All of us. Now. Come on, let's go."

"Adam and I need to go to St. Julien's first," MacLeod said. "To see how Joe is doing."

"Fine," Matthieu said. "We'll go with you and wait outside."

###

The Flamanville team was playing away, and their rugby field was deserted but for half a dozen children so well wrapped up their gender couldn't be guessed, and a couple of dogs. Melissa wandered around, inspecting the weather-worn clubhouse from the outside. The euphoria of the hunt ebbed, leaving her tired, dispirited, and an uneasy feeling lodged under her ribs. The reins had slipped through her fingers and if she didn't snatch them back, events could run out of her control.

*Maybe,* said a sudden, desperate hope, *it had been a clerical error and Joseph was still in the Bichat Hospital.* Melissa hurried back to her hotel room.

Disappointment was bitter. The error, if it was one, was still there. She was about to get out of the database when she realised new notes had been added. Joseph was in the St. Julien's Hospital in Surtainville following a massive heart-attack.

"No!" Melissa said aloud. She needed him alive. He had to live. She forgot about lunch, about her plans to travel to Jersey, and concentrated all her energies on hacking into the St Julien's database.
By the time Melissa succeeded, night had fallen and she had a splitting headache from hours of staring at the screen. But Joseph's case-notes were in front of her once more, and amongst the incomprehensible medtech-speak, she found the words *condition critical but stable*.

The relief was almost as overwhelming as the shock of his collapse, but it didn’t last long. She was caught in a dilemma now. Should she give him time to recover his strength and risk losing him again? Or should she move quickly and take the chance his heart would betray them both? And then there was Jack Carston to consider. How easy would he be to manipulate, let alone Duncan?

In the end Melissa compromised. She'd give Joseph three days' respite, then she would start the final moves of the game.

###

"Mac," Dawson said, and woke up. For a moment he gazed at the white ceiling, disoriented and alarmed. Something was missing. MacLeod was missing. No, Methos had found him and they were in Surtainville. So was he, in the local hospital.

Memories of pain came back to him, of his own physical agony and of MacLeod's anguish carried to him with the immortal's quickening. He'd known for years MacLeod looked on him as a friend, but he had never realised just how much the damn fool cared about him. More than a friend--family. Okay, for his part, that's how he felt about MacLeod, but somehow he hadn't expected it to be reciprocated. To know that it was, warmed him.

Then for the first time, the reality of what had happened hit him. He had experienced an immortal's quickening. He'd felt, sensed, that immortal's emotions, had caught fleeting glimpses of strata below the flood of rage and grief and determination that Joe Dawson was not going to die. *'Duncan....'* It was a memory of a whisper in his mind, spoken with a yearning love and shared grief that sought to enfold and comfort, as if the speaker had been there on the path, reaching out. But there'd only been MacLeod and himself. Until Evans had turned up and bought in, snatched up the fallen cane and swung it--and Methos had suddenly appeared.

Methos, who knew how sick he was, and surely didn’t expect him to live through a major attack. There was no one else it could have been. And he, Joe Dawson, Watcher and dying man, had picked up Methos' thought from MacLeod through the quickening link. Which meant that the two immortals were linked as well, and there’d been nothing platonic about that back-eddy of a mental whisper.

"Well," Dawson said. "Well, well, well. What have we here?" He scowled up at the ceiling. "You old bastard. So that was your agenda." Or was it? Immortals didn’t often form monogamous relationships amongst themselves, or so the Watchers had observed over the centuries. But when they did, those relationships tended to be intense and long-lasting, broken only by death of one or both. Would Methos, of all people, leave himself so very vulnerable to another immortal that he’d make that kind of commitment? He had no doubt MacLeod would, but Methos?

The scowl became a slowly broadening grin. "Caught, by God. Hook, line and sinker, and reeled in for the gaff." And if they were together, then Methos' devious survival instincts would balance out MacLeod's sometimes misplaced honor, and their chances of survival in the Game were increased exponentially. Then his grin froze. What if that final Gathering arrived and they were the last two standing?
Dawson killed the thought and the image that went with it. Sufficient unto the day and all that crap. No matter what came down, it wouldn't happen in his lifetime, of that he was certain.

Think about the quickening instead, and those eerily beautiful harmonics that had come to him just before MacLeod entered the room. Harsh and discordant, MacLeod had told him once, when he'd asked what another immortal's quickening felt like. Like metal scraping on glass, Richie had said when he'd asked him the same question: jarring and borderline painful.

Maybe because he had a small share of it rather than a quickening of his own, MacLeod's had been nothing like that, nor had he picked up on Methos. There had been just the rich multi-chord coiling around the subtle percussion that pulsed in synch. His fingers twitched. Not to record in a journal, but to try to recreate the riff, coax it from his guitar. Though when he did have the chance to update the chronicles, official and personal, he'd have to be circumspect-- The door opened, startling him, and MacLeod was there, smiling, Methos just behind him.

"Fuck it," Dawson grumbled, ridiculously pleased to see them, "what are you trying to do, give a guy a heart attack?"

"Feeling better?" MacLeod's smile widened.

"Hell, I dunno." Dawson returned the smile. "Can't stay awake long enough to decide, but the doc says that should wear off in a couple of weeks as my system adapts to the drugs. What's the latest on Carston and Stone?"

"Nothing new, yet," Methos answered. "We'll keep you updated, don't worry."

"You better," Dawson said grimly, "or I'll be calling in some heavy duty payback when I get out of here. How did the game go?"

"We won. Just," MacLeod said.

"Good." Tiredness crashed over him, the undertow dragging him down. "Oh, shit, I only just woke up...." He fought a losing battle to keep his eyes open, heard MacLeod speaking as if from a distance.

"No sweat, Joe," MacLeod said, his voice gentle. Dawson felt his hand clasped and a cloak seemed to wrap around him, anchoring him, keeping him secure and warm. He slept.

###

With infinite care, MacLeod laid Dawson's hand back on the blanket. "He's hating this," he said. "He's angry, frustrated, impatient and wants out of here, and I don't have to be a Datorigni to know it."

"All the more reason to keep him sedated." Methos moved to the end of the bed, checked the clipboard. "I know it's worrying, but don't let it get to you. The human body does a lot of its regeneration during sleep, and by the look of these charts, he's stabilized nicely. The signs are good, MacLeod, I think he's going to get away with it this time."

"I hope so."
"Duncan," Methos said. He put his hand on MacLeod's shoulder, and at once their connection was lifted to another level. MacLeod closed his eyes, the better to relish the closeness, and the light pressure moved along his shoulder to cup the nape of his neck. "Don't build up your hopes too high. You've gained him a little more time. Days, weeks, maybe months if we're lucky, but that's all."

MacLeod nodded, unable to speak for a moment. Grief averted and grief to come tore at him, and he found solace in the unshakable support of the bastions surrounding him. Methos would feel Dawson's loss as keenly as he did. But neither of them would have to mourn alone.

"I know," he said finally. "And it is pissing me off that Carston and Stone are lousing up the time we should be spending with Joe. Come on, let's get out of here before Gervais sends in a search party. We don't have to stay long, just enough for a meal."

###

The rest of the Flamanville rugby team were already eating by the time the seven men arrived at the restaurant. Places had been reserved for them at the long table. Or rather, the three tables that had been pushed together to form one. The greetings they received were cheerful, insulting, and Methos couldn't detect any overt hostility toward himself. Curiosity and speculation, yes, along with some distrust, but not outright antagonism. The routing of Theroux had been noticed, and that gained Methos some ribald, if barbed, congratulations. Which had to be explained to MacLeod, who found it funny, if his snickers were anything to go by. Methos glared at the side of his head, and wondered if he could get out of his chair and away fast enough to avoid retaliation if he was to belt MacLeod around the ear.

"Things will be uncomfortable for a while," Yves said quietly at his other side, "but in a couple of weeks, it'll have blown over." He poured more wine, topping up his and Methos' glasses. "We all like Duncan, respect him, and it won't take long for that to be extended to you. Unless you want him to go back to Paris?"

"No," Methos said quickly. "He's happier here than he's been for a long time, and even without a stick of furniture in it, that house is already under his skin. It's his choice, his decision."

"And you will stay with him?"

"Yes." Methos looked into the dark eyes under the thick grey brows, aware as well that Jean-Michel listened across the table. "He wants to make a home here, that's fine by me. I have places in Paris and in London if he wants to go there. But I tend to get very irritated with people who hurt him, and friends can wound him more deeply than enemies."

Yves nodded. "That's what I thought. Just give us some time to come to terms with the idea of two men as lovers. Not that it'll stop the bad jokes and leg-pulling. Of course, if you were to start training with the team--"

"No."

"Why not? You're young, fit, you look fast. Give me a good reason."

Methos smiled. There was only one way to put a stop to the rugby-nag, and he took it. "It's not the game, it's afterwards. A naked MacLeod is a temptation I can't resist and we would embarrass you
all," he said demurely.

Yves choked on a mouthful of wine and Methos helpfully patted his back for him. "All right," the man said. "You win. So, what's the real story behind this Madame Stone?"

"We don't know, not yet. But MacLeod’s right about her being dangerous."

"The ladies will be careful," Yves promised. "Do you and Duncan work out together? Karate? Tai Kwon Do?"

Methos smiled. "Are you asking me if I can look after myself in a fight? The answer is yes. Most definitely yes, and if I get half a chance I'll be hitting Theroux with a hell of a lot more than a handbag."

"This time, we'll be waiting for them," Yves said grimly.

"I've jury-rigged something that'll help us out there," Methos said. "A security setup on the cliff-stair."

"Sounds interesting," Jean-Michel cut in, leaning forward. "How does it work? What did you use? Wires or infra-red?"

"Both," Methos said, recognizing the gleam in the man's eyes. "I want to get something similar on the gates as well." He launched into a detailed description of the gadgetry he'd assembled. Jean-Michel interrupted with questions and suggestions while groping for a ball-point pen and an unused paper napkin, then sketched out circuit diagrams.

By the time the group broke up to go their separate ways, Methos had a volunteer to help him the next day. Methos didn’t want help, nor anyone else around to intrude on the time he and MacLeod could spend together, but if it was the price of winning Jean-Michel to their side, then he'd go for it. MacLeod could give him due recompense for his self-sacrifice at a later date.

###

The ladies did take care. No questions were asked outside of church-groups, Young Wives Circles, and friends' kitchens, but in those centers of local knowledge, the prints of the portrait sketch were pored over with great interest.

Melissa Stone was in Surtainville. She’d been asking questions about the Dubosc yard in general and had shown a decided interest in the Sensei. And who could blame her? He was such a handsome man, with something sensual about the way he moved—and gay! Such a waste. But then, this Adam was a good looking young man, not as classically handsome, perhaps, but intriguing. A striking couple, to say the least. Surtainville hadn't had an openly gay pairing before—you couldn't count those two old men who bred cats, or Bernard and his succession of young trainee chefs.

As for Madame Stone, she'd seemed a nice, pleasant woman, easy to talk to, caring…. Which was probably why that Carston man had sent her, leaving Patric Theroux and that Anders to draw everyone's attention in their direction. No one knew where she was staying, yet. But they'd find out by simple observation, and once the word went round, she'd learn nothing more from anyone about the Sensei and his Adam. Gay or straight, Duncan was part of the community, and by virtue of their relationship, so was Adam now. She was an outsider and foreign. Worse, she was Jack
The photographs had arrived Saturday morning, and now they were once more spread out over the sunny yellow quilt, some sliding a little. Dominique looked again at each one. She smiled, ignoring the blurring tears, and touched the image of what had been Leon's den. It boasted a fireplace now, built, Duncan had written, by himself, with stones from the garden and the bay. Even in the small frame of the photo, it looked right somehow, and she wondered why she and Leon had never thought of it.

She picked up another photograph. Her studio-workshop, and now a dojo, of all things. It was an unfamiliar word, something to do with martial arts, according to Janet. Today Dominique had sent Alice off to the library in St. Helier so she could read up on the whys and wherefores of a dojo. Well, not sent, exactly. Alice had been as curious as she, and had volunteered before Dominique could ask it of her.

The dojo, like most of the others, was a brightly pale space, airy and open. Dominique had the mental picture of a small, grubby Duncan-child growing up in a home that was filled with love, but was dark and gloomy, with low ceilings and heavy walls. Her smile became a chuckle. Well, he'd certainly filled the House of the Lanterns with light. Her home had been a place of deep, rich colours, the green and gold and ambers of forest depths, the sumptuous burgundies and blues and ochres of ancient frescoes. It had been an unstinting well of love, an inspiration for her art and Leon's, and a bastion against grief and loss. His home would be an eyrie open to the sky, where that trammeled spirit of his could heal and fly free and always find a peaceful sanctuary.

'In the spring,' he'd written, 'when the weather is better and I've managed to get all the furniture in, you can come and see for yourself.'

Spring was only a matter of weeks away. Alice had already brought her the first tiny bunch of early snowdrops.

Which reminded her there were no pictures of her garden among the spread, and she sighed. The reason was obvious. It was such a wreck that Duncan might not want her to see until he'd put it at least partly to rights.

Alice's familiar tap sounded on her door, and the girl came in, her pretty face flushed with the cold.

"I've got a couple of books, Madame," she said. "The librarian was helpful, after I told him I didn't want the fighting manuals. They've both got a lot of the history and philosophy, and this one's got chapters on the etiquette. He said that's important, too." She hesitated, her eyes wide and nervous. "Um, Madame, That Man's boats are in the Victoria Harbor. Two of them. Should we tell M'sieur?"

"Alice," Dominique said sternly, "the library is nowhere near the harbor. What were you doing there?"

"I go there a lot of the time, Madame," she protested. "I like boats. And," she went on, eyes sliding away, "I thought someone ought to keep an eye on That Man."

"He doesn't live on the wretched boats, girl!" Dominique snapped. "Moreover, he is dangerous! You shouldn't put yourself in harm's way."
"I know, Madame, but he uses them to smuggle things, people, and he's an enemy." There was a stubborn set to Alice's mouth, and Dominique didn't know whether to hug the girl or box her ears.

"Please, my dear, don't do it again. Stay away from Jack Carston. Promise me?"

"I promise, Madame, but what about M'sieur MacLeod?"

"I'll tell him. In fact, I'll phone him. Go and get his telephone number from the office, and I'll do it now."

When Alice returned, Dominique keyed in an outside line and dialed. The call was answered almost immediately, and a crisp Normandy voice identified itself as the Dubosc Boatyard. She asked for Duncan MacLeod and gave her name. At once the Normandy voice became warm and friendly.

"Madame, it's good to hear you. This is Gervais Dubosc. I doubt you'll remember me."

"Ah, but I do," she smiled. "I recall very clearly every one of those young tearaways who'd come over the wall and steal the peaches. How are Jean-Michel and little Matthieu?"

"Well, Madame, though Matthieu isn't so little these days. He's taller than Duncan--who is here. Sensei, it's Madame De Carteret for you."

"Ma Dame?" It was Duncan's richer timbred voice, and she could hear concern in it.

"I'm phoning to say thank you," she said quickly. "The photographs are beautiful and I'm eager to see it all for myself. I'm also phoning because Alice has been playing James Bond. Two of Carston's boats are in the Victoria Harbor."

There was a slight pause. "Thank you, Ma Dame. Is she there, can I talk to her?"

"Of course." She gave Alice a smile and put the phone in her hand, then listened, intrigued, to the one-sided conversation.

"M'sieur?" the girl said cautiously. "Yes, the Ariadne and the Halcyon. No, I didn't, M'sieur! I watched from the pier, with my brother's field glasses. There's always lots of people there. During the night--they weren't there yesterday." There was another, longer pause. "Um, no, I don't think so. The Halcyon looked like she was being prepared for a refit, but the Ariadne was deserted. At least, I think she was. The curtains were drawn shut in the cabin portholes, and no one was up on deck. But I asked around and someone remembered seeing stores being taken aboard first thing this morning." She listened again, and slowly a blush and a smile spread over her face. "Thank you, M'sieur--I won't, I've already promised Madame." She handed the phone back to Dominique and the smile became rueful. "He said what you did, Madame."

"So I should think." She snorted. "Duncan," she continued, "is there going to be trouble again?"

"Yes, Ma Dame," he said without hesitation. "Which is why I won't be visiting you until it's over. And this time it will be, one way or another."

Dominique thought she heard a muttered agreement from Gervais, but couldn't be sure. "Then take care of yourself," she commanded, "and come to see me as soon as you can."

"I will, Ma Dame."

Face somber, Dominique put the phone back on its rest. Jack Carston had a lot to answer for. If she
had her strength and mobility back, she'd do her damnedest to bring him to an accounting. In fact, she acknowledged wryly, all she needed was mobility—and the weapon. It doesn't take much strength to pull a trigger. She'd lived through war and invasion, played her part in the Resistance despite her youth—albeit a small one—what was Carston's death compared to that? Besides, what would a court of law do—sentence her to life?

###

Gervais' face was still red, and MacLeod grinned at him as he replaced the handset.

"'Y'know," he said, "it's always been a wonder to me how seemingly frail old ladies can cut a man down to size with a few well chosen words. What did she say to you?"

"Nothing much," Gervais said with a too-casual shrug. "Just reminded me of the times we used to sneak over the wall and steal her peaches when we were kids."

"Peaches? There're peach trees in my garden?"

"Yes, a couple espaliered along the south-facing wall. Or there used to be. They might have survived."

"Damn." MacLeod sighed, shaking his head. "I've been so tied up with the house itself and Carston I'd forgotten about that. There's a lot of work needing to be done on it before spring—"

"And no time to do it," Gervais finished for him. "Right now a few plants are the least of our worries, what with Carston, Stone and your M'sieur Dawson. How is he doing today?"

"Okay," MacLeod answered. "No more attacks so far and the new drugs don't seem to be having any major side effects, other than making him sleep most of the time. But they expect that to ease off after a while. Of course," he added, "it's only been a couple of days." And no sighting of Melissa Stone since Friday. Where the hell was the woman? He forced his mind back to Carston and his boats. "Alice said they were taking stores on board the **Ariadne**."

"Not the **Halcyon**?" Gervais frowned. "Damn. The **Ariadne** will have motor-launches that can get into your bay at any tide, and the forecast is for fog by nightfall. The wind's already veering southwest." He hesitated, then shrugged, mouth settling to a grim line. "We start tonight, then, with you, Jean-Michel and me. Tomorrow night, Adam with Yves, Thierry and Matthieu."

"Okay, Boss," MacLeod said. "Except Adam will be a part of it every night. He can sleep during the days."

Gervais nodded, and grinned. "You better give him a call and pass on the good news," he suggested.

"And ask him to make sure there's enough coffee to keep us all awake and alert through the night," MacLeod said, reaching for the phone.

But at dusk, with patchy fog layering in, the plan changed. Alice phoned, voice breathless with urgency and determination.
"I know I promised," she said, as soon as Gervais passed the phone to MacLeod, "and I haven't broken it. I got my brother to keep watch. The *Ariadne's* just left harbor."
They gathered in the Lanterns' kitchen for the final briefing. The plan was simple. Ambush, take down Carston and whoever came ashore with him, and call in the Police Judiciaire. They were to take no chances, no paybacks. There were seven of them, all hard-edged and resilient, and surprise would be on their side.

Before they went to their stations, Yves patted down both Bouvins and removed a sawn-off shotgun and a couple of old WW2 Mausers.

"No firearms," he said. "We are concerned citizens, not a private army."

Thierry heaved a sigh that fluttered his thick moustache and added a Browning Hi-Power to the small pile on the worktop.

"Nice," said Jean-Michel, giving it an admiring stare. "Where did you get that?"

"Never mind," Gervais said quickly. "Yves is right. No guns. Anyone else have something they want to donate?" He swept a stern glance around the group, but met only head-shakes and wry amusement.

"But they could well be armed--" Jean-Michel began.

"If we start pulling guns it'll turn into a bloodbath," MacLeod said. "Yes, it's a risk and yes, it puts us at a potential disadvantage, but that's the way it's going to be."

"So accept it or go home," Gervais finished, giving MacLeod a nod of thanks.

But the man wasn't looking at him. "Adam," MacLeod said, a certain exasperation in his voice.

"What?" The gaze that turned to him was limpid and serene, and Gervais frowned.

"Shell out. I know you, remember." The granite determination in MacLeod deepened Gervais' curiosity.

"MacLeod--" Startled innocence was in every syllable.

"Do it, you old bastard, or I'll search you to your skin. And you won't enjoy it," he added as a wicked grin began to spread over Pierson's face.

"For God's sake! All right!" Pierson snapped. His innocence was transmuted to irritation, and to Gervais' surprise and to Jean-Michel's slack-jawed shock, Pierson took a short barreled S&W Magnum from his waistband and a smaller calibre automatic from his left sock. "Happy now?" MacLeod didn't speak, just waited. Pierson said a few short, foreign words that had to be profanity, and removed a Glock from the sleeve of his coat. Matthieu began to snicker, until a glacial stare from Pierson shut him up.

MacLeod stowed the weapons away in the cupboard and turned back to Gervais. "Ready when you are, Boss," he said calmly.

"Good. Okay, Carston might not come in tonight, but we have to assume he will. All cell phones on?" He got a chorus of assent. "Then everyone to their places, and stay alert."
The Bouvins and Thierry were hidden behind gorse and dead bracken opposite the gates. Yves was up on the roof with a pair of field glasses. Gervais, MacLeod and Pierson, were in the room off the living area, waiting in almost total darkness. The only lights were the two green pin-points from the security control in Pierson's hand.

It was a long wait. They sipped strong black coffee from their flasks and talked quietly, discussing mundane things like MacLeod's plans for the garden, and Gervais' plans for the re-vamping of the boatyard.

Yves called in at regular intervals, but with little to report. The fog thickened, though the intermittent south-west wind tore an occasional clear patch. Those pools of clear air became fewer as the night wore on, but finally, just past midnight, Yves had something new. He'd caught a brief glimpse of the *Ariadne*, anchored nearly a mile off the coast.

Increased tension added to the waiting, and Gervais became uncomfortably aware of his bladder. His cell phone vibrated soundlessly against his hip. He pulled it out.

"It's Yves," he told his companions. "What do you have?" he said into the phone.

"Can't see anything, now," Yves replied. "The wind has died and the fog's closed in hard. Visibility's down to about ten yards. I think I can hear an engine--yes, it's coming closer--they're heading in. No sight of them in this damned murk though, no idea how many on board." Gervais passed the information on to MacLeod and Pierson, knowing Yves would update Thierry.

Time passed. Yves called in again; "A motor launch has just come into the bay, can't see it, but the sound's clear enough. I'm coming down. Stand by, they'll be landing any time." Moments later Yves was at his side, and after a long pause, Gervais saw one of the small green lights on Pierson's home-made security system blink to red. They were on the cliff-stair.

The incomers made no attempt at stealth, nor to cover their entry. Glass shattered and the doors were pushed open, grating on the shards. Gervais swore under his breath. This was the last trip, and Carston intended to leave his mark. He heard a sigh from MacLeod and knew he'd made the same lateral jump.

Voices reached them, echoing in the empty spaces.

"--wasn't necessary, yet," said Theroux. "We wait until the pickup is made, and they're well away from here!"

"What does it matter?" Anders snarled. "It'll all be rubble and ash by dawn."

"You'll do as you're told," Theroux cut back, "or you'll be ash in the middle of it! Get them down to the garage and make sure they stay there. Remember, no lights!"

A confusion of footsteps, a door opened, and silence.

"Damn," Pierson said mildly. "No Carston."
Theroux and Anders made two more trips to and from the launch. During their short absences, Gervais and MacLeod left the room to investigate. The meagre light of a muffled flashlight revealed large plastic canisters stacked in the living room under the skylight, canisters containing liquid. The smell of kerosene hung in the air.

Finally, Thierry called in. A large van with a crew of two had backed down the path and was pulling up outside the gates. The second green light became red; the gates had been opened, and Thierry reported two men walking towards the house.

Theroux and Anders came back up to the living room and opened the front door.

"Last shipment, Marco," Gervais heard.

Silently MacLeod and Pierson headed for the front door, Gervais for the basement door behind the bar. He slammed it shut and turned the key. At the sound Theroux jerked round and met MacLeod's hand in the centre of his chest. He staggered back into Anders and both fell, sliding down the steps to the flagstones below in an ungainly sprawl. Pierson hit the switches by the door, and light flooded from the house to form an oasis of visibility outside.

Four men were caught in the sudden light, for a split second frozen in surprise. Then Anders and Theroux lurched to their feet, helped by the newcomers, and MacLeod and Pierson waded into them.

It was two against four, but the Dubosc crew gathered round, in no hurry to contribute. It was obvious neither man needed help. Pierson, Gervais realised, was as much a martial arts expert as MacLeod, and they wove the unequal fight into a net of unorthodox skill that had Matthieu and Jean-Michel whooping with delight.

Uncannily, both men seemed to know where other was at every moment, covering each other's back, taking no unnecessary risks, just silent, ice-cold efficiency all wrapped up in deadly grace. Yves was right about Pierson, no question. Regardless of what Gervais felt about the sexual side of their relationship, there was no doubt in his mind that these two men were a perfect compliment to each other.

Belatedly Gervais remembered the unknown number of people locked in on the ground floor. "Shit!" he said. "Yves, stay here and make sure the Bouvins don't do something stupid. Thierry, you're with me."

He ran inside and listened at the stair-door. He thought he could hear movement but wasn't sure. Thierry nudged him to one side of the door and put a gun in his hand: Pierson's Glock. He himself held his Browning. Gervais nodded. Now was the right time to be armed. "Do you speak French?" he called. No answer. "Do you speak English?"

There was a long pause. "English," said a man's voice, guttural with accent. "What's going on?"

"There's been a change of plan. I'm going to unlock the door. Come out with your hands up and empty. We are armed and the house is surrounded." Well, it always worked in the TV cop shows.

"We claim political asylum!" called a woman's voice, high-pitched and panicked. "Political asylum! Don't shoot!"

"That's fine, Madame," Gervais answered. He reached across and unlocked the door. If anyone charged out they'd cannon straight into the L-shaped bar in front of it. "Come out," he ordered,
backing away.

They obeyed, two men and two women with pale, drawn faces, eyes bruised with tiredness.

"You are Police?" one of the men asked.

"No," Gervais said, the heavy gun trained unwaveringly on the man's chest. "For which you can be thankful. Our cops have a reputation for shooting first. Put your hands behind your backs."

They obeyed, and Thierry used heavy duty cable ties to bind their wrists--Pierson's suggestion. More effective than ropes or handcuffs, he'd said, and Gervais acknowledged he was right. "How many more of you?"

"No more. Just me, my brother and our wives. What are you going to do with us?" Fear made his voice harsh, and Gervais grinned.

"You'll find out," he said. "Thierry, get Yves, Duncan and Adam, and search the house, and be careful," he ordered. "You, outside."

The fight was over. Anders lay unconscious, and Yves was looping a cable tie round his slack wrists. Theroux was already cuffed, was doing a lot of groaning, but his eyes were more or less open. Jean-Michel and Matthieu were dealing with the other two semi-stunned men.

Gervais waited until the search party came back and reported the all clear. No one was with the launch anchored in the bay, either. The operation had been only a partial success: Carston wasn't there. Gervais stood over Theroux and resisted the urge to plant his steel-capped boot in the man's face. "Where's Jack Carston?" he said. "On the Ariadne? He's finished. As of now."

"He's got nothing to do with this." Theroux spat blood. "It's my sideline, not his. He fired us, remember?"

"Are you sure you want to stick with that?" Pierson cut in. "You expect us to believe you borrowed your ex-boss's posh boat to ship in some illegals?"

"Yes."

"You must think we're as dumb as you are," Jean-Michel said with a fierce grin.

"Proof," Theroux sneered. "You need proof, and you don't have it. They won't talk. The two men are facing long jail terms for blackmail, extortion and murder. Of course, it was only Romanian gypsies they killed, but they'll still probably get twenty years if they go in front of a judge."

A cell phone rang inside Theroux's jacket. He tensed, and Pierson bent down, took the phone and accepted the call. He'd put on thin cotton gloves, Gervais suddenly realised. So had MacLeod, who was methodically searching the others, searching, examining and replacing. They'd leave no fingerprints. "Lanterns Antiques," Pierson said in cheerful English. "Can I help you? We have a nice line in redundant smugglers, complete with a bonus set of illegal aliens, currently on special offer…. Hm. No takers. He rang off."

"Who was it?" Thierry asked over Matthieu's laughter.

Pierson shrugged. "The Contact name came up as Boss. He didn't speak but it's probably Carston. Okay, now we have our smugglers and illegals, what the hell do we do with them?"

"Call the Police," Yves said with immense satisfaction.
"No," Gervais said. "We can't." Theroux gave a hoot of derision, and Jean-Michel sank a kick into his stomach.

"Why not?" Yves demanded.

"We don't have Carston," Gervais said grimly.

"That can be arranged," Pierson drawled, face and voice bland.

"We won't need to arrange anything," MacLeod said. "After this, he'll be coming for us. If we give him the chance. It's time I paid him a visit."

"We pay him a visit," Pierson said pointedly. "I watch your back, remember?"

MacLeod acknowledged that with a nod and a smile, then his face became cold, remote. He walked to Theroux and crouched in front of him, locking gazes with the man. "Tell Carston that the rumors out of Vienna are wrong. Tell him Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod will be coming to St. Helier very soon so he either faces me or travels fast."

"That's supposed to mean something?" Theroux croaked.

"It will to Jack Carston. He's been around long enough to know my name."

"What about the others?" Thierry demanded. "We can't let them go!"

"We're not going to," Gervais said. But his brain refused to think for a moment. He'd been banking on Carston being there, he realised, hadn't planned for anything other than that.

"We give them to the Police," MacLeod said quietly. "Adam and I will talk to them, make sure they see the sense in keeping Carston and us out of this. Then we use the van to drive them to Cherbourg and leave them. I phone in an anonymous tip-off--"

"Why you?" Jean-Michel interrupted. "Any of us could do it!"

"Because your Normandy accent is strong enough to cut cheese." MacLeod smiled. "And we don't want any more links with Normandy than Cherbourg itself. I can speak Languedoc," he finished, his voice rich with the unmistakable lilts and stresses of that region.

"Afterwards, we burn out the van," Pierson went on. "There're all those canisters in the house to help it along."

"We'll see to it all," MacLeod said. "You guys get home and let your families know you're okay."

Gervais nodded. Not for the first time, he wondered who the hell Duncan MacLeod was, and now he had to add Adam Pierson to that. Special Services surely didn't begin to cover it. But he could trust them both implicitly. Couldn't he? A tiny sliver of doubt slid into him. "Do it," he said. Tomorrow was soon enough for the rapidly multiplying questions.

###

Carston bit back his fury and kept his smile undiminished. He was in the bar of his yacht club, socializing, giving himself a solid alibi for when the Lanterns went up in smoke across the sea on
the Cap de Flamanville. Only there would be no conflagration, it seemed, and who the hell had answered the phone? It should have been Theroux, which meant things had gone seriously wrong. But it wasn't Dubosc nor any of his crew, not even the new one. That mellifluous English accent was the genuine article, and he recalled Theroux had already said something to him about an Englishman. Whatever, it meant Dubosc had been waiting for them. They'd been tipped off. If Theroux had sold him out, he was a dead man.

He made another call, this time to the *Ariadne*. Theroux wouldn't have left her unmanned. It was answered with commendable swiftness, and the voice was a familiar one.

"Bristow," he said, "Get the *Ariadne* out of there. The delivery's gone wrong and I want her as far away from Normandy as you can get her."

"The launch is still in the bay, sir."

"But it is the un-named one, yes? With nothing on it that'll link it to me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then leave it there and get out, fast. Call me when you're away clear." He cut the connection.

This was the last straw. No more games, Dubosc was going to pay. With nothing to show he was involved, not even Theroux and Anders who had been publicly sacked, he could afford to take the risk of sitting and waiting for the right time. Then Gervais Dubosc would wish he'd never been born.

Keeping his cheerful facade in place with some difficulty, Carston took another leisurely drink, and went home to wait for Bristow's call. The fog was still heavy, but the man was a competent sailor and the boat had all the latest navigation equipment. There shouldn't be a problem.

Just like there shouldn't have been a problem with the Lanterns.

###

Carston's cell phone rang again at gone three in the morning, a reverse charge call from a public phone in Cherbourg.

"Will you accept a call from a Patric?" asked the operator's bored voice.

"Yes," he snapped.

"Boss?" Theroux said.

"What the hell is going on?" Carston demanded.

"They were waiting for us." Theroux's voice slurred, as if he had difficulty talking. "They beat the shit out of us and dropped everyone but me into the cops' arms with an anonymous tip-off. They're going to dump the van and burn it."

"So Dubosc does have plans. Why not you as well?"

"Because MacLeod gave me a message for you," Theroux paused. "He said to tell you that the Vienna rumors are wrong. Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod will be coming to St. Helier and
"You can either face him or travel. That's all. He also said you've been around long enough to have heard of him."

"Oh, yes," Carston said softly. "I've heard of him." Ice shivered down his spine, an adrenalin rush of anticipation and something else he didn't want to put a name to. He should have listened to his instincts the first time he'd learned of the Bouvin-MacLeod.

"Sir, who is this MacLeod bastard? He's more than hired muscle, isn't he? A hitman?"

"He's someone I'm going to stop," Carston said. "Permanently. Get back to the area, but keep your head down and stay away from Flamanville and Surtainville. I'll be in touch."

"I'll be with my sister, then, in Les Pieux. Uh, sir, they got my cell phone. And the other guy there, MacLeod's English fuck-toy. He told MacLeod he'd be coming with him, to watch his back. Sir, I want a piece of those fucking maniacs!"

Carston remembered the details of Theroux's report from the weekend: MacLeod was a queer. His boyfriend had turned up, an Englishman called Adam Pierson. The name had meant nothing to Carston then, and still didn't, but now the pairing did. Master and student.

"You'll get it," he promised. He cut the connection, plans already arranging themselves in his head.

###

As soon as MacLeod arrived for work the next day, Gervais called him to the office. Yves was there as well, leaning against the filing cabinets, arms folded across his broad chest. A wary tension filled the room, not suspicion exactly, but not far off it. MacLeod had been expecting something like this, and he could only hope he'd be able to retain Gervais' friendship.

"Jack Carston," Gervais said, motioning him towards a chair. "You know him." There was a controlled accusation in his voice. "All this time--"

"I know his type," MacLeod said quietly, "and if he doesn't run, there's only one way to stop him."

"You're talking murder," Gervais said bluntly. "You, of all people. I never thought you'd condone that."

"He'll have his chance, if he decides to face me."

"How many men have you killed?"

"Not relevant."

Yves cleared his throat. "After Henri died," he said, "you said we're not cops, we're not vigilantes. Are you electing yourself judge, jury and executioner now?"

MacLeod met the man's dark eyes and didn't flinch or hesitate. Yes. "The less you know the better it'll be."

"No," Gervais said, a deep sorrow in him. MacLeod wanted to reach out to him, but Yves was already there, a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Because we're all part of this, the smuggling, Henri's death. We all share the responsibility."
MacLeod shook his head, consciously spread his cloak around them both, sheltering. "Carston's choice, my decision," he said quietly. "I never heard of Carston before I came here. But this fight, if he chooses it, is nothing to do with Henri or the house, or the smuggling. It's to do with who he is and who I am, and that was set in us from the moment we were born."

"If he runs," Yves said, "you'll hunt him."

MacLeod smiled wryly and shook his head. "I don't hunt. Of course, he doesn't necessarily know that, and hopefully, it'll be a long time and many hundreds of miles before he realizes it."

"If he runs," Yves said again. Then he nodded, accepting the inevitable.

Gervais said nothing. He looked up, eyes seeking MacLeod's. "Do we still live in the jungle, then?" And answered his own question. "Yes. So we have Rottweilers at the gates to protect us. But sometimes Rottweilers aren't enough, are they? Like the Law. Then you have to let the jungle deal with its own so the walls stay firm and no more innocent people get hurt. Or killed."

"Sometimes," MacLeod agreed softly. "And only if there truly is no other way."

"Is Adam part of your jungle? Is Joe Dawson? Evans?"

"Adam is, but Joe and Evans are up on the walls." MacLeod smiled. "Keeping an eye on things." He hesitated, smile disappearing, reading the pain and confusion eddying around the man. "This won't touch you," he said. "We'll move out, leave the area--"

"Shit! No!" Gervais barked. "This is your home, fuck it! And I trust you! I know you'll do what's right. Phone Adam, ask him to come and see me. I'd like him to review our security systems here at the yard. Now stop slacking off and get back to work!"

"Yes, Boss."

###

Joseph's improvement had shown a steady climb. Melissa breathed a sigh of relief as she closed down her computer. No more heart scares, and if she was translating the notes correctly, the new drugs were already having an effect on his narrowed blood vessels. Even the prolonged sleepiness seemed to be wearing off a lot faster than the doctors expected, and no other major side-effects had been recorded. Which was very good news, because her options were fast running out. Her money was almost gone, now. She had enough to pay her hotel bill and the car rental, with a bit left over for a couple of meals, but that was it.

Things were all falling into place as she'd planned, though, and Melissa gave herself a few minutes to contemplate the perfect web she'd woven about her victim. Admittedly, there had been a few unforeseen accidents along the way, but she'd been able to work around or with them, and blend them seamlessly into the whole.

Now it was time for the last few moves. She picked up her phone, dialed a number.

###
"Mr. Carston," the secretary said diffidently, "there's a Ms. Stone on the line, wanting to talk to you."

"What about?" He frowned. "I said no interruptions, Philippa."

"Yes, sir. She said it's personal, about a John Trecarrick, and a Duncan MacLeod."

"Did she?" he drawled, sudden interest in his voice. "Put her through."

The connection clicked through. "Good morning," said a woman's voice. American, and sounding as bright and cheerful as an airline advert.

"What's your problem, Ms. Stone?" Carston demanded.

"Oh, I don't have one," she said, and chuckled. "But you might. Did you know that the Duboscs have hired Duncan MacLeod?"

Some missing pieces fell into place, and to bluff it out, stall for time and information, was instinctive. "I haven't a clue what you're talking about, Ms. Stone," he said, keeping his anger out of his voice.

She took no notice. "Well, not hired exactly," she went on over him. "His halo's a little too polished for that. Persuaded him they need his protection. He's the one everyone is calling Sensei, of course, and he's at the boatyard now."

"If you say so, but I'm in the dark, here." He leaned back in his chair, ankles crossed, ostensibly relaxed. "Are you trying to set me up, Ms. Stone?"

She chuckled again. "He's the one I'm setting up. He's very decorative, I'll admit, but just not my type, and I rather think the world will be better off without him."

*That was interesting,* Carston acknowledged, and decided to stop playing word-games. "So why don't you take his head yourself?"

"Because I am not in his league. You, however, are, especially now. He's been out of the Game for five years, he's not carrying any sword these days, let alone that katana of his, so I'd say he's a spent force, wouldn't you? Just think, John Trecarrick, the quickening of Duncan MacLeod. He has to be among the more powerful immortals still living, regardless of his swordsmanship."

"Did you tell him who I am?" he asked casually. No one else could have told MacLeod he was a fellow immortal, but he was not surprised by the lie when it came.

"Good heavens, no," she said. "You are going to be quite a surprise." She paused briefly. "I want to watch him die," she said, voice abruptly chill, expressionless. "I want you to get him to the Dubosc farmhouse this afternoon, and be there waiting for him. In return, I want a ringside seat. What you do to the Duboscfs after that is entirely up to you."

Now that he could believe. Carston made a snap decision. "You have a deal," he said. "I'll be there. So will MacLeod. All it'll take is a phone call."

"Oh, good," she said, the smile back in her voice. "At three o'clock, then. I knew I could rely on you, my dear."
He ended the call and phoned the apartment in Les Pieux.

###

Gervais stuck his head out of the office. "Duncan!" he yelled. "Phone call!"

"Go on," said Matthieu, "I can take a cigarette break while you're gone."

MacLeod grinned and put down the wrench. "I thought you were giving it up."

"I am. Tapering off."

"Yeah, right." The grin didn't last long; Dawson could have had another attack. He loped across the yard and entered the office. "Who is it?" he asked. "The hospital?" Gervais shook his head, frowning.

"He didn't say, but his voice sounded familiar, just can't place it. All he said was that you have some things in common."

MacLeod felt his expression harden. Methos looked up from the computer, his face unreadable, but MacLeod was aware of his lover's resignation. He picked up the phone. "MacLeod," he said.

"'Morning," said an unknown voice. "It's Jack Carston. We haven't met, but I think it's time we did."

"Carston." Beside him, Gervais swore and came abruptly to his feet. "So do I. I take it you got my message?"

The man laughed. "I got it. You've been out of the Game for a long time, MacLeod. Lost that certain edge, I'd guess."

"Then you'd guess wrong. Where and when? St. Helier or neutral ground?"

"The Dubosc farm."

"Not an option. No one else needs to be involved."

"They already are. It's called killing two birds with one stone. Or sword, in this case. I get your quickening: they get an object lesson. You come to me or the Dubosc's start dying, starting with the old girl. Before you ask, she doesn't know I'm here. Yet. I want your head, but it'll be a fair fight, by the Rules of the Game."

"That's breaking the Rules from the outset, Carston. We don't involve others!"

"Too late. The farm, and you've got a quarter of an hour to get here, or I'll start lopping mortal heads." And he cut the connection.

Fury and anxiety warred in MacLeod, and he turned away from Gervais' hand on his arm to meet Methos' agate eyes. A matching anger was in their depths.

"Tell us," Methos said.
"Carston is at the farm," he said. "He's decided to face me, but he's already chosen the ground. Gervais, I need you to come along and get Grand-mère and Grand-père out of there while I deal with him."

"Grand-père won't be around. He'd've gone to the market at Les Pieux. If Carston's hurt her--"

"He hasn't, he says. Everyone else stays out of this. Let's go." He took his jacket off the hook, feeling the weight of the billhook in its makeshift sheath inside the lining, and headed out of the office.

"MacLeod," Methos said as he joined him. He held out his long charcoal grey overcoat. "You take mine." His other hand touched briefly on MacLeod's wrist. 'And the sword inside it.'

"Thanks." He smiled. "But no. Your car or mine?"

"Mine. This is Jack Carston. You won't be able to talk him out of it."

"I know. He had his chance, so he'll take the consequences. Either way, the challenge is between him and me, not you."

"We've already had this discussion, remember? You can play by your rules, MacLeod, and I'll stand by unless or until it looks like you're going to lose. Then I'll play by mine and they are a hell of a lot older than yours."

MacLeod didn't answer. The fleeting contact of a few moments before had already clarified the determination and commitment for both of them.

"Wait a minute." Gervais hurried after them. "What's going on here?"

"Just dotting i's and crossing t's," Methos said as MacLeod slid into the passenger seat, leaving Gervais to scramble into the back. "Carston probably thinks MacLeod is your resident heavy so he intends to take him out. He won't."

"Too glib, Adam," Gervais said grimly. "Duncan's talking about a challenge and rules. That sounds a little formal for taking out hired muscle."

"Carston is an old-fashioned kind of guy." Methos smiled without mirth. "And MacLeod talks too much."
Dawson shifted restlessly, sick of the sight of the pale walls and brightly coloured generic framed print hanging beside the door. He had a personal CD player and some of his favorite CDs, courtesy of MacLeod and Methos. He had a TV combo, ditto, along with a supply of DVDs, books and magazines from them and Evans. What he didn't have was his laptop, his prostheses and the freedom to get off the fucking bed and walk out.

It was only a matter of days since he'd come so very close to dying, but he felt better now than he had for weeks, months, and he wanted to be out in the real world giving his two immortals the backup they'd be needing against Stone and Carston. Rees Evans was a nice guy, and he visited twice a day, but he couldn't tell Dawson all he needed to know.

Methos had turned up in the morning to give him the lowdown on the previous night's operation, and the sheer frustration of being out of the loop was enough to effect the monitors and bring back that dull ache in Dawson's chest. It didn't help to have the doctor tell him they would be keeping him under observation for weeks yet, to make sure the drugs were performing as they should, and the side-effects continued to be minimal.

So far those side-effects followed the predicted pattern: drowsiness, and constipation. As the need to sleep all the time decreased, he'd been told he could expect urinary discomfort, and joint pain over and above his arthritis. None of them sounded pleasant, but nothing he couldn't live with when they showed up. So far, the medical experts were pleased with his reaction to the cocktail of drugs they were feeding him. Very pleased.

He grinned. Dawson had his own theories about that, but he wasn't about to air them to anyone but MacLeod and Methos, and then not until he was out of here. Knowing he possibly had one up on medical science gave him a boost, and he relaxed back on his pillows, reached for the headphones and the CD player. The door opened and a white-coated woman walked in, a file in one hand, the other in her coat pocket.

"Good morning, Joseph," she said. "How are you today?"

Dawson took in the attractive face, the elegant sweep of brown hair, the pleasant smile, and his heart gave a painful lurch. He didn’t let it show.

"Good morning, Ms. Stone," he said calmly, and her eyebrows twitched up a fraction. "How did you find me?"

"Computers are a wonderful invention, especially if you know how to get past firewalls. Bichat transferred your case-notes to here. Simple as that."

"If you're looking for MacLeod, you're fresh out of luck. I don't know where he is."

"I'm sure." Her smile showed her disbelief. "But it doesn't matter, because I do. How did you recognise me? And don't even think about the panic button," she added. She took her hand out of her pocket and a small automatic was aimed at his chest.

"Trade secret," he said, keeping his voice level with an effort.

"Oh, well, can't be helped. There are only the loose ends to be tied up now. There's no problem with Duncan, my dear, I know exactly where he is, and Adam. I called Amanda earlier today, just telling her I was a nurse and you've been admitted here. We didn't chat--nurses are very busy. I
should think she'll be arriving within the hour. Then we can start." She gave him a bright and charming smile. "Of course, when I say here, I don't mean here at the hospital. We're going for a drive, Joseph. I'm sure you'll find it therapeutic."

"Can't do that," Dawson said, a chill shivering down his spine. It occurred to him that maybe Melissa Stone was not quite as sane as she could be. "I'm pretty sick. On my last legs as a matter of fact." And he smiled like a shark at his own black humour.

"I know, but this won't take long. You just have to sit and watch, Joseph." She glanced at her watch. "Come on, out of that bed."

He shook his head. "No can do," he said.

"Don't be stubborn, dear." She made a small gesture with the gun.

"I'm not. You know that old song 'I Left My Heart in San Francisco'"? He didn’t trade on his disability, but right now he'd grab any chance to throw her off balance. "I've got another version of it; I left my legs in Viet Nam." And he jerked the covers back, showing his truncated limbs below the short hospital gown. "They took my prostheses away and I don't know where they are."

Her hesitation was only momentary. "Then they can find them for you," she said. "You know Rees, don't you? Such a promising young man, I think. Well, if he lives, he will be."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He's in my hotel room, strapped to a small packet of semtex along with a timer. If I'm not back to disarm it by a certain time, I'm afraid his rugby playing days are over. It might not kill him outright, of course, bu…." She let the words trail off, her smile sweet as poisoned honey.

"You're bluffing," Dawson snapped.

"Am I? Can you risk that I'm not?" She took off her white coat, revealing a smart burgundy pant suit, and slipped the automatic into the jacket pocket. "You can push the panic button, after all, Joseph. You're going to sign yourself out." The file and coat were placed neatly underneath the bed, out of sight.

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded. "What's Mac done to you?"

"Nothing, my dear. I don't know him, of course, but I'm sure he's a perfectly charming young man. Well, not young exactly, but you know what I mean. It's fascinating how some of them eventually grow up after their first death, isn't it? They may not age physically, but the learning curve to spiritual maturity can occasionally be quite marked. It's a shame I can't continue to monitor him after today, he really is rather fascinating as well as decorative. So is the elusive Adam. For such a young immortal, he is remarkably--what's the word I want… astute?"

"Ms. Stone," he said, "I'd be interested to know how you learned about immortals and Watchers."

"I'm sure you would," Melissa said gently. "But that is my trade secret, Joseph, and at the moment you're wasting time. Are you sure you want to do that? Or have you forgotten about poor Rees? Just push the button and tell them you are signing yourself out. Do anything else, and Rees suffers."

Grimly, Dawson did as he was told, part of him giving due respect to her coolness. It was going to be hard to deflect this woman off her chosen course.
Medical opinion certainly didn't shake her. The doctor was vociferous in his objections, but in the end he had no option but to capitulate. After all, a patient could not be held against their will unless their sanity was in serious doubt, and Dawson was eminently sane. Dawson signed all the required forms, promised to take the medications, promised to return if he changed his mind, then took back his prostheses.

Under Melissa's blandly smiling gaze, he strapped on his legs and dressed. The wellbeing he'd felt before she arrived was gone. The drugs kept his heartbeat steady, but the pain in his chest was acute. Each breath was never enough, and burned in his lungs, but at least he could draw those breaths.

The doctor wouldn't let him walk out under his own steam. A nurse brought a wheelchair and Dawson got into it with a sense of relief and the solicitous aid of Melissa Stone. The longer he could hold out, the better chance he would have of pulling some kind of stunt that would spike the crazy bitch's guns. If he raised a fuss in the hospital, she had too many vulnerable targets, but outside on the road to wherever, he might see his moment.

As Melissa pushed him through Reception, the familiar figure of Rees Evans came in through the doors. The woman had been bluffing, but it was too late now to do anything about it, especially as he was effectively trapped in the wheelchair.

Heart trying to speed up, Dawson stared right through Evans and willed the young Watcher not to react, praying that Melissa didn’t know him by sight, would not recognise him. Evans hesitated briefly, turned it into a search for a handkerchief and walked past without attracting her attention. At the same time, Dawson spoke up. "Ms. Stone," he said, "Did you say Amanda's coming here?" Please God, let Evans overhear and guess what he had to do.

"Yes, dear. I've left a message for her at the desk, in your name. Just enough to bring her running along to where I want her."

"So it isn't just MacLeod?"

She chuckled again and Dawson's lips thinned. He was rapidly coming to hate that light, warm amusement. "Oh, Joseph, didn't you believe me? It never was about Duncan, or Amanda, or Adam."

"Who, then?" They were out of earshot now and he had no idea if Evans had heard or not.

"My car is just over there. Let's get you settled in comfortably, then we can have a chat on the way."

"Where to?" he demanded, but she just gave him her sweet smile and said nothing.

'Settled in comfortably', Dawson found, meant his wrists handcuffed behind his back and a seatbelt fastened across him. It was a long way from comfortable.

Dawson didn't try to get more information out of her until they were driving through Surtainville. "So if you have nothing against Mac," he said, "what was the circus with Rob Chrétien about?"

"Another puzzle," she said with that bright smile. "How did you know his name? Or is that a trade secret as well?"

"Yeah. How did you know the kid was immortal?"

"I didn't. I made a logical guess. Why else would an immortal have adopted him, carefully trained
him in Kendo of all things, if the boy wasn't one? I shot him and he came back, so I was right."
"My God." It came out as a harsh groan. "You are a piece of work. Why? What was the deal?"
"Drawing Duncan out from wherever he'd buried himself."
"Hah! It is him!"
"So you could watch him die."
"What?"
"It's all about you, Joseph, not them. Just you."
"Me? What the hell have I ever done to you? I don't even know you!"
"You murdered a fine man, Joseph," Melissa said gently. "So you are going to suffer the way I did. You are going to watch the people you love most die in front of you."

Stunned into a momentary silence, Dawson stared at her. "Who?" he asked, voice hoarse. "Who did I kill?"

"Matthew Hale. Did you even know his name?"

"I knew him." On firm ground now, Dawson put his shock behind him. "He was one of the scum who'd kidnapped Mac, drugged him and stuck him in that obscene travesty. Then he was trying for him again."

"So you shot him. You emptied a gun into him. TWEP is the term in some circles, I believe. Terminated With Extreme Prejudice. He had a wife and three children, did you know that, Joseph?"

"Yes, I knew. But you don't figure in his profile."

"Of course not. No one knew about us. He was my soul-mate, Joseph. We shared everything, including his work with the Watchers, in ways his poor little suburban wife never could. And you gunned him down."

"Damn right," Dawson snarled. "I made a judgment call, lady, and if I had to do it again, I damn well would!"

"Yes, dear. Which is another reason why you will pay. Not that I don't regret the necessity. Duncan seems like a nice boy. Amanda, though, is a bit of a scamp, and probably deserves it. Adam is so young an immortal he's a total innocent. Or at least, I'd still be thinking so if I hadn't seen him murder Kuon Lo. Still, he has a fine mind, judging by his research work. It's a shame, a tragic waste, but you care about them, so they die."

"They don't have to," Dawson said quietly. "Don't do this. Kill me if you want to, but they've done nothing to you. Leave them out of this."

"You care about them," Melissa said again, "So they will die. You are going to hurt, Joseph, just the way you hurt me."

"Mac's expecting you," he said. "You'll never get close enough."

"Wrong. I've arranged a little diversion. Jack Carston, aka John Trecarrick. He'd like to add the great Duncan MacLeod to his tally. He has a chance of succeeding, too. Duncan has been out of the
Game for a long time and he seems to have misplaced that rather lovely Japanese sword of his. At least, I haven't seen him wearing a coat long enough to hide it since I've been here. Even if he fails, he'll hold Duncan's and the others' attentions long enough for me to get my shots in.

"Once they're down, all I have to do is remove their heads while you watch. Then you die. Unless...." She considered him briefly, before switching her attention back to the road. "Perhaps it would be more painful if I let you live. Not that you have much longer, from what I've gathered from your case-notes. But those last few weeks or months won't be very pleasant, will they, Joseph, knowing that your friends are dead and it's all your fault?"

"It's a hell of a cliché, but you won't get away with it," Dawson said.

Melissa shrugged. "That isn't the object of the exercise," she said. "You are. What happens afterwards doesn't concern me."

"Lady, you are one sick bitch."

"Language, Joseph," she said serenely.

Dawson didn't answer. He stared ahead, ignoring the countryside scrolling past, focussed on the approaching confrontation. There had to be something he could do, even hogtied as he was.

"That's it, up ahead," Melissa said. She pulled into a field gateway, a couple of hundred feet from what looked to be a typical Normandy farmhouse. Two men fought in its wide yard, one with a bright blade, the other with something short and dull and heavy-looking.

"Oh, good," Melissa said cheerfully. "Jack succeeded, though he is a little early. No matter. Would you like to see one more quickening, Joseph, or shall I drop them both from here?"

For a brief moment he was on the verge of telling her to do what the hell she liked, but the instinct to buy time was too strong. "Yeah," he said harshly. "One more."

"They're a fascinating phenomenon, aren't they? Now, I'm sure Adam would have come along as well-- Yes, that's his rental car by the gate. Good." She reached behind her to take a sniper's rifle from under a tartan travel rug on the back seat. "I think I'll make sure of him first. I didn't like what I saw in Vienna, and it would be foolish to take chances this close to the end."

With his hands cuffed in the small of his back and the seatbelt anchored, he couldn't make a break for freedom, but he had been carefully shrugging the upper strap of the belt down off his shoulder. Now Dawson took a chance of his own. He threw himself sideways, trying to drive his shoulder past her to hit the horn in the centre of the steering wheel, to warn MacLeod and Methos--

Melissa gave a shrill cry of anger and drove the rifle butt into the back of his head, and Dawson slumped across her lap, semiconscious.

She heaved him upright, shoved him back against his seat. "That," she said, somewhat breathlessly, "was very foolish! And it gained you nothing but a headache. Really, Joseph, I expected more sense from you." But she didn't get out of the car. Instead she slammed it into gear and pulled away fast, heading for the farmyard. He'd managed to buy a little more time.

###
Evans headed for his car at a run, reaching for the cell phone in his pocket. He keyed in Pierson's number.

"The Stone woman--she's got Joe," he said as soon as the man answered. "I heard her say something about leaving a message for Amanda. She's driving a blue Ford Escort. I'm on her tail--"

"No," Pierson snapped. "Stay there. She'll be bringing Joe to where we're headed. I'm going to call Amanda and put her in the picture. You stay out of this, Evans. It's an unholy mess and you're not part of it."

"Where are you?" Evans demanded, slowing to a halt. "What's going on?"

"Need to know, Evans, and you don't need to."

"Fuck you, Pierson!" But the connection was gone and Stone's car was out of sight. "Fuckfuckfuck!" He sprinted back into the hospital and hurried to the main reception desk. "You have a message," he said to the woman. "For Amanda Darieux. She's outside in the car, and we're pushed for time. Mademoiselle, please--"

"I'm sorry, Monsieur, I can't--"

"There's an address in it, somewhere she needs to be for the fashion shoot, open it and tell me that at least! Mademoiselle, I beg you! I daren't go back to her and tell her I don't know where I have to drive her!" The frantic urgency in his voice was very real, and the woman relented.

"I should not," she said sternly. "But--" She handed it to him.

"Mademoiselle, you are a life-saver!"

He ran out of the door, and across the parking lot toward his car. In his haste he didn't see the tall, elegant woman hurrying to the hospital, a phone to her ear. He cannoned into her and the cell phone went flying. Recognition was instantaneous. "Amanda!" he gasped, grabbing her as she staggered. The coincidence was more than fortuitous. Maybe there was a deity who looked out for desperate Watchers. "Thank God! Adam Pierson's trying to reach you! Come on!"

"What?" She writhed out of his hold with an unexpected strength. "Who the hell are you?"

"Rees Evans. Watcher. Melissa Stone has got Joe and she's taking him to the farmhouse. MacLeod and Pierson are already on their way there. It has to be some kind of trap."

"Gee, what a surprise. And maybe you're part of it. Back off, Evans." Her voice was cold, with an edge to it that put a shiver down his spine. There was a gun in her hand, hidden by their bodies from a passerby's casual glance, and it pressed against his belly. "Pick up the phone and give it to me." He obeyed, moving carefully. The ruthlessness about her was warning enough. But, God, she was lovelier than any computer image.

Amanda took the phone from him and put it to her ear. "Adam, I've just collected someone who says he's a Watcher-- Yes, mid-twenties, about five-nine, red hair, Welsh accent-- No, I won't. I want him where I can see him. He's coming with me." She paused briefly, listening. "Don't give me that, you jerk! I know you, remember! And you owe me big time! Athens! You lying asshole!" Her voice was furious, but there was a growing smile on her face. "Think I don't know your game plan? Serves you right if it backfires on you! How is he? Good. He better stay that way! See you soon." She fixed Evans with a slow appraising stare that made his pants feel suddenly too tight. "Adam vouches for you," she said. "Do you know where this farmhouse is?"
"The Dubosc place. Yes."

"Good. Get in the car. The red Lotus over there." Amanda gave him a push in the right direction. "How do you know where they're headed?"

"She left a note for you," Evans said, and handed it over. Amanda took a few seconds to read it, and handed it back with an angry snort.

"She expected me to fall for that? See how she signed it? Joseph. Hah! She's crazy, Evans." She slammed the car into gear and took off with screeching tires.

"Slow down!" Evans yelled. "You want every gendarme in Surtainville after you? Wait 'til we're clear of the town, for God's sake!"

Amanda swore at him, but dropped her speed.

"So how long has Duncan been here?" she demanded. He didn't answer immediately, and she thumped the steering wheel impatiently. "Talk to me, damn it," she pleaded, her voice shaking. "I'm sitting here worried sick about Joe so give me something else to think about!"

"A while," Evans said. "Since November, from what I can gather. They think he's a relative."

"Huh. How long has that other crafty bastard been around?"

"Who?" Dazedly, he gazed at her profile. She was truly stunning--her perfume was more than distracting--


"Haven't a clue," he said. "Didn't know he was around until Joe collapsed and I--" And he stopped.

"And you what?"

"Nothing."

"Listen, honey, I don't need another stubborn idiot in my life. I already have Duncan MacLeod and he can out-stubborn Mount Everest. So talk! Please?" She took her eyes off the road and laid a gentle hand on his knee. "Please, Rees? I need to know. I thought Duncan was dead! Do you have any idea what that did to me? What's going on here?"

"I don't know!" he protested. He wondered where her Watcher was, and if his transgression had been called in. Fraternizing, first MacLeod and now Amanda. He surrendered on a sigh, and told her most of what he knew about MacLeod's life in Surtainville, and his own brief contacts with Melissa Stone. "It's my fault she's here," he finished, putting words to the underlying guilt in his heart. "My fault. I have to try to--I don't know, put it right?" But he didn't mention MacLeod's quickening in Dawson. Some deep instinct told him to keep that to himself.

"Not your fault, honey," Amanda said quietly. "She's crazy. But no way can she win out against Duncan, Adam and me. I'm more concerned about this Jack Carston. You did the right thing there, telling Duncan he's one of us. Duncan's a White Knight. He takes exception to immortals who hurt his friends."

"I know, but--" He broke off, unable to go on. After all, what would she know about being a Watcher and what it meant? But it seemed as if she could read his mind, or the expressions that passed over his face.
"Yes, I understand. I really do. You took an Oath. You think Joe found it easy to break his? But friends are worth it, especially Duncan."

"I don't even like him!" Evans snapped.

"Don't be dumb. Of course you do. You just don't want to."

"That--is so wrong!" Evans said hotly. But it wasn't. He did like the man, admired him, even. And had so many questions he wanted to ask. So he asked Amanda instead.

"Is Pierson his student? I mean, was he, before MacLeod disappeared?"

She laughed. "No, Adam's no one's student. He knows his way around the block and he's a good man to have at your back in a crisis. As long as he doesn't want what you want," she added darkly.

"You don't trust him?" Evans asked, quietly aghast. "But--"

"Sure I trust him!" she protested. "I just don't--trust him. Don't worry. If he's guarding Duncan's back you couldn't ask for better. No one can out-sneak that guy."

"But he was only a researcher before Kalas!"

"And a damn-fine one. Got an incredible mind, and a knack for stringing things together." She reached across and gave him a pat on the knee. "Don't worry," she said again. "Like a lot of academics, Adam's as ruthless as a surgeon filleting fish. He doesn't only use words to flay; he can use a blade just as skillfully when he has to. Duncan will be fine."

The information offered was supposed to reassure him. Evans thought about it, added it to all he knew about Adam Pierson from the Watchers' files, and what he'd observed, and his mind made a lateral jump.

"He wasn't killed by Kalas back in '95, was he?" he asked quietly. "He's older."

"Hey, don't leap to conclusions." Amanda chuckled. "Not all neos are sword-swinging, headhunting quickening junkies. Some get sensible really quickly. Some are sensible right from the start."

"Better the chances of survival," Evans said.

"Absolutely. Me, I'd sooner run than fight, which is why I'm still around."

"I'm glad," he muttered.

Amanda gave him a warm glance and crinkled her nose in a charming urchin smile. "So am I," she said. "You're okay, Rees Evans."

He flushed and changed the subject. "It has to be difficult, sometimes, going on. I mean losing people."

"Yes. But really, it's no different to anyone else. Everyone loses family, loved ones, over time. It's part of life. It just happens more often to us." She gave a very French shrug. "And it is just as difficult for an immortal to pick up the pieces and go on as it is for a mortal. That's why we were so desperate to find Duncan. Joe is--very sick."

"I know."
"It's going to hit all three of us when he buys it, but especially Duncan. He thinks the world of that man. And now Stone and Carston are spoiling what could be Joe's last days and I will rip their heads off with my bare hands for doing this to them!" It was a venomous, strident avowal, and Evans knew Amanda meant every word. It was a forcible reminder that immortals were a race of killers. But tears glistened on her eyelashes and cheeks.

"Amanda," he said abruptly, "what if there was no Prize, no compulsion to play this insane Game, to take heads?"

"To hell with the Prize," she snorted, groping for a handkerchief and blowing her nose forcefully. "And nothing compels me to do anything I don't want to. Personally, I think the so-called Prize is just a cosmic joke some ancient smartass came up with on a dull day and it's stuck. And I don't have a compulsion to collect heads. Jewels, now, they're another thing." She shot another swift glance his way. "But seriously, without the Game and regardless of the Prize, if we didn't cull ourselves, the planet would be hip-deep in immortals. We don't seem to propagate as a species, but the babies come from somewhere and they're still showing up. You almost certainly have a better idea of our numbers than I do, and given there are always going to be ones who slip through the net like poor Rob Chrétien--"

"Who was he? Why was he calling himself--"

"Can I ask you a question?" she interrupted. "Why didn't you call in sighting Duncan as soon as you saw him?"

"Well, I wasn't sure, was I," he said, distracted momentarily.

"But when you were sure?"

"Well, I--wanted to find out more," he said lamely. "There was Carston and then it got complicated."

"I'll bet."

"About Chrétien--"

"Is Duncan happy here, Rees?"

"Uh, yes, I think so," he said guardedly, not sure what she wanted to hear. "He's well known and liked, accepted as one of their own in a lot of ways. Plays in the local rugby team--"

"What?"

"Winger. He's good, too. And he's moving into a house up on the Cap. Don't know if he's bought it or if it's his boss, but it's been renovated and it's almost ready to be lived in."

"That one Carston was shipping illegals through?"

"Yes."

"So Duncan could be putting down roots?" she asked hopefully.

"Could be, but I'm not the one to ask."

"I guess not." She gave him that impish smile again, leaned across and planted a swift kiss on his cheek. "Thanks, Rees. You and Duncan are going to get along just fine, if I have to bang your
heads together. How would you feel about coming out of Research? Hal, my Watcher, is talking about retirement. He has two little girls and a third on the way and wants to be with his family. Watching me is living out of a suitcase, I'm afraid, so how about it, Rees, honey?"

"No," he said, colour high and an odd regret singing in his veins. "Thanks, but I can't, see. The Oath, and I-I'm good in Research. I'd be crap in the field. Red hair. A man told me men with my hair shouldn't try to shadow anyone. I--"

"Sweetie, you're babbling. Don't worry, it'll work out, you'll see. Once we've sorted out Melissa bloody-Stone and Jack Carston."

"Yeah," he said flatly, and changed the subject. "Take the D117 at the next junction." They were out of the town now. Amanda put her foot down, and the sports car leapt forward.

"This is the sort of thing Duncan was always afraid of," she said abruptly into a silence broken only by Evans' directions. "His friends being made to suffer because of him, being used against him. And if all the stress finishes Joe off, it'll be even harder for him. He'll blame himself, I know he will." She took a corner in a sliding glide. "Thank God Adam's there. Duncan doesn't hunt for trouble, you know. It just seems to find him, somehow. Okay, so he doesn't duck and run the way Adam does—or me, for that matter, but he doesn't go looking for it. Unless someone does something he can't overlook. Like this. Damn it, now I'm babbling."

"You're worried about Joe," Evans said quietly. "He must be quite a guy."

"You have no idea. The man's solid gold, believe me."

The road curved around a stand of trees and the farmhouse was there, red brick built between dark timbers, its chimneys rearing against a frost-blue sky.

"That's it," Evans said, and Amanda pulled into a field gateway.

"Okay, Rees," she said, "here's the way we're going to play this." She reached across him and took a gun out of the glove compartment. "You are going to stay here, I am going to make like the Seventh Cavalry and haul my guys and their tight little asses out of the fire."

"She's expecting you," he protested. "Amanda, don't be daft!"

"Yes, but she doesn't know I'm on to her, does she? All that note said was, 'Come to the Dubosc farmhouse,' and she'd signed it in Joe's name. Except she'd written Joseph and he never calls himself that. She is seriously deranged, Rees, but she's also starting to make mistakes. Stay here. If anything happens to you, Duncan will have my guts if not my head."

"Amanda!"

"Do I have to cuff you to the steering wheel?" she said with a grin and a wiggle of her eyebrows. "This won't take long."

She slid out of the car and climbed the field gate. Within seconds she was out of sight, cutting across the field toward the farm buildings. Before she disappeared from his view, Evans was searching the car for another gun, swearing under his breath when he didn't find one. Aware he was wasting what could be precious time, he abandoned the hunt and followed in her wake.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Pierson tossed his cell phone to MacLeod. "Stone's sprung Joe out of the hospital and is en route," he said. "Amanda's on her way, complete with Evans." He handled his car with the economical skill of a rally driver, hurling it at corners with an élan that made Jean-Michel's style look like a sedate old lady's.

"Evans?" MacLeod was indignant. "What is this, a spectator-sport now? Should we be selling tickets?"

"Probably."

Wedged in the back, Gervais tried to read the two men in front. Both seemed relaxed, there was no obvious tension, and Pierson's hands were light on the wheel. He couldn't see MacLeod's face to judge his expression, but the glimpse he had of Pierson in the rear-view mirror showed a rueful smile.

"You'll use mine," Pierson said suddenly.

"No," MacLeod replied. He turned his head and looked at the driver, and Gervais saw the deep affection and amusement in the steady glance. "I've got my own."

"Mine is bigger. Pointier."

MacLeod snickered. "Braggart."

"And yours is in Brussels, you said."

"Yes, that one is, and it's as long, if not pointier. But this one's right here." He patted his chest.

"No finesse," Pierson said mournfully. "The youth of today...." And he shook his head.

"It'll get the job done."

"Will it? This man is not a three-foot-high midget, so he'll out-reach you by a good two feet."

"It'll be okay."

"Ah-huh. How many times have you used it?"

"I've worked out with it enough to know its balance."

"Workout and combat are two different things."

"Stop worrying."

"I'm not!"

"What kind of combat?" Gervais demanded, leaning forward.

"Nothing you need bother about," MacLeod said, turning further to smile at him. "All you have to
do is get to Grand-mère, bring her back to the car and get her out of there. I'll deal with Carston."

"Shit! And if he's not alone?" Gervais said, scowling. "He could have half his army there!"

"He won't," MacLeod said confidently.

"I'll be watching MacLeod's back," Pierson said.

"Where does Stone fit into this? Is she working with Carston?"

"Immaterial. She is mine," Pierson said, with an ice-cold finality that slammed Gervais back in his seat.

"Not if Amanda gets to her first." MacLeod chuckled. He didn't seem to be affected by that deadly chill. "I'm going to do my damnedest to finish this fast, then all we have to do is take out Stone."

"Duncan," Pierson said quietly. "Don't take chances, and don't underestimate him."

"I won't and I don't. But we have to clear the decks before we get to her." He stopped talking; the farmhouse was before them, and Margot Dubosc was over by the side of the house, scattering grain for the chickens. As they watched, she dusted off her hands and went back inside.

"She's okay," Gervais said, startled and relieved.

"Yup," Pierson said cheerfully. "From his point of view he wouldn't want to be hampered by a little old lady. His aim is to kill MacLeod and get out clean and fast, without involving bystanders. He won't be in there with her, either." Both men's eyes turned to the barn farthest from the house. "He's in there." He pulled up just outside the gate. "Gervais, go and get her. We'll take care of the rest."

"Okay." He climbed out of the car and sprinted across the yard to the kitchen. Margot had just picked up the rolling pin, was about to start on the pastry for the evening meal as he burst in.

"I didn't expect you home," she said, startled. "Grand-père's at the market--"

"Later. Come with me. Now." He took her arm and tried to urge her to the door, but she resisted.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded. "What's got into you?"

"Hush. Carston is here."

"Is he, by God," she said grimly, hefting the rolling pin. "I want words with him."

"Not now. Duncan and Adam are going to deal with him. You are going to sit in the car and wait." He hurried her towards the car, watching MacLeod and Pierson disappear into the barn, Pierson's long dark coat flaring about him.

"And where will you be?"

"Providing backup if they need it." Gervais opened the nearest door and helped her in. "Grand-mère, stay here, don't move!" He shut the door and raced for the barn. He had no weapon, but the wood-axe was— Inside the barn, metal on metal rang like flawed bells and he stopped in his tracks.

Carston held a sword, a bloody big thing with a curved blade and a knuckle guard, and all MacLeod had was a billhook. Frozen with horror, Gervais watched the sword blade whip round in a vicious slash that would have taken MacLeod's head off if he hadn't danced out of the way. Carston was laughing.
"You're next, student!" the man yelled, lunging after his opponent with the speed of an attacking wolf. "Hope this sorry excuse taught you better than he's showing!"

"You'd be amazed," Pierson drawled. He was a dark shape in the shadows, leaning nonchalantly against the cider press, hands in his pockets. Then he straightened, and Gervais felt the granite gaze focus on him. "Gervais," he said in tones of long-suffering exasperation, "I thought we told you to get out of here?"

"Nah, let him stay," Carston jeered. "He can pick up the pieces. Then," he went on, breath coming shorter now, "when I say 'jump', he'll remember today and ask 'how high?' Won't you, Dubosc?"

"The fuck I will," Gervais snarled, and scooped up the wood-axe. Neither of the combatants had slowed in their erratic, circling dance, but the bigger man was beginning to show a gloss of perspiration on his face. His breathing was heavier, while MacLeod looked as cool and unflustered as he'd been in the car. Carston was completely unmarked, and MacLeod, be it luck or skill or both, didn't have a drop of blood on him. Though the work-jacket showed a slashed arm, the sweatshirt beneath it was whole.

Gervais could only pray it would remain that way.

A flurry of blows drove MacLeod back, the solid weight of the billhook and his own agility all that kept the blade from his body. He seemed to half stumble on the barn's threshold, went down and rolled out into the farmyard. Carston followed. MacLeod came to his feet, ducked under the swing of the sword and the billhook flicked out at Carston's legs. With a shout, the man leaped back.

"You nearly got lucky," Carston panted, and his hammering advance took them both into the centre of the yard.

"Thank God for that," Pierson said. "Gervais, give me a hand here."

"What?" He tore his eyes away from the uneven contest with difficulty. Pierson was crouched over a stack of canisters he was damn-sure shouldn't be there, and looked very similar to the ones that Theroux had brought to burn the Lanterns.

"MacLeod's been trying to get him out, so I'd have a chance to shift these. Make yourself useful and help. What's on the other side of that?" He pointed to the smaller door opposite the main entrance.

"An orchard. Why? What--?"

"Carston has incendiary ambitions again. We need to get them out of range."

"Range?" It was like clutching at shadows and hoping for a firm anchor in a world gone suddenly crazy. "What's in them? Kerosene, like before?"

"Yes."

"Shit." He dropped the axe and hurried to Pierson's side. "What the fuck is going on here? That maniac is trying to take Duncan's head off! With a sword!"

"That's the general idea. Don't worry. He won't succeed."

"You can't be sure of that!"

"Yes, I can. It's a long story, and we'll tell you later. But MacLeod has Carston's measure and he'll whack him when he's ready."
"But--"

"He's fought better men than Jack Carston," Pierson said gravely, "and won. That bloody daft billhook won't make any difference. Carston is dead meat and you don't need to be a part of this. As soon as we've dumped this stuff, take Grand-mère and the car and get out fast."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Carston," Pierson said in a voice as soft and chill as arctic snow, "is dead meat."

Gervais was silenced, for the moment.

Pierson grabbed a couple of canisters and headed for the orchard doors at a near-run. Gervais started to follow suit, but his gaze was pulled to the contest in the yard, and he couldn't look away. Carston's swings and lunges were murderous, but MacLeod was smiling, moving as fluidly as an athlete on a gymnasium floor-- A sudden sharp crack rang out behind him, and MacLeod stumbled. Carston lunged and MacLeod twisted away, parried the blade with the weight of the billhook and regained his balance. He was no longer smiling.

Abruptly Gervais realized the sound had been gunfire, and had come from behind the barn. He spun on his heel, racing for the far door. It stood ajar, but innate caution stopped him from barreling out into the open. Instead he peered through the gap between door and frame, and swore.

Pierson was an ungainly sprawl in the grass. Blood fashioned bright blooms on his thigh and the grass beside him.

Gervais started forward, then paused, still in the gloom of the barn. He needed a weapon--anything--because Theroux was pushing his way through the far hedge into the orchard, and he carried a rifle. Casual, confident if his swagger was anything to go by, Theroux strolled around the trees to stand over Pierson's still body, and Gervais' groping hand found the old horseshoes stacked on the shelf behind the door. He picked one up and moved silently out of the barn.

All of Theroux's concentration was on the man at his feet. "I may not be the marksman that Anders is," he said, sneering. The words carried faint but clear to Gervais. "But I promised myself I'd blast your balls off. Now I'll blow your head off." He raised the rifle for a point-blank shot.

"Not even close," Pierson snarled, his voice tight with pain.

Gervais stepped clear of the door, horseshoe held poised. "Theroux!" he yelled and the man jerked round. The rifle swung toward Gervais. He dived to one side and hurled the piece of dark iron with the accuracy honed on the rugby field, forcing Theroux to duck or risk a broken skull. At the same time Pierson rolled over and his Glock was in his hand. He fired and Theroux gaped down at him, jaw dropping with shock. Then the man was falling, folding, a puppet with its strings cut.

"Get those canisters out here!" Pierson ordered, his hands clamped around his thigh in an attempt to slow the rush of blood. His face was white and sweat stood out on his forehead and upper lip. Shock, blood loss, pain--

"Don't be so fucking stupid!" Gervais bit back. "And let you bleed to death?" He pulled his belt out of the waistband of his jeans and wrapped it high around Pierson's leg. The wound was midway between groin and knee, and was pulsing blood. That was the worst of signs. Pierson would bleed out--

"Leave it!" Pierson tried to push him away. "The canisters!"

"Alright!" He tightened the belt as much as he could, then glanced at Theroux. The man lay
unmoving, eyes wide and staring up at the sky. A thick stream of blood had poured from his mouth and stained his cheeks, but the flow had stopped. The centre of his chest was soaked in blood. Theroux was dead, Gervais knew it, but he reached for a pulse anyway. There wasn't one, in wrist or throat.

Grimly, Gervais ran back into the barn. The fight was still going on in the yard, but he didn't spare it a glance. Instead he gathered as many canisters as he could carry and lugged them out to the orchard. At first he thought Pierson was unconscious. He lay on his back in the grass, eyes closed, chest heaving, and amazingly not dead. He propped himself up on his elbows as Gervais approached.

"Good man. How many more?"

"Four," Gervais said. "Duncan's still putting up a fight."

"Of course he is," Pierson said with a snort. "Now he can finish it. Get the last ones, then help me up."

Gervais sprinted back for the remaining canisters, dumped them with the rest. Then he reached down and carefully lifted Pierson, using all his considerable strength to spare the injured leg. The alarming flow of blood had lessened to an ooze, and Gervais breathed a relieved sigh.

"Go," Pierson ordered. "Get your grandmother out of here."

But Gervais ignored him. Instead he pulled one of Pierson's arms over his shoulders, and hooked his own arm around the man's waist. "If I go, you go," he said, and half carried him along the outside of the barn, heading for the small gate that would let them into the yard.

The combat hadn't eased down. Carston was flushed and panting, but wasn't noticeably slowing. MacLeod still breathed evenly, though a film of sweat sheened his skin. That slight smile was back, and an expression that Gervais could only call detached serenity. He'd thought he'd seen MacLeod at his best when he'd taken out Anders and Theroux, now he knew he hadn't. The man was a great cat: crouching, leaping, every movement fluid and deadly. The billhook should have been incongruous, but it wasn't. It was an extension and integral part of him.

Suddenly Carston was off-balance, stumbling as if he'd tripped, but there was nothing visible to cause it. The sword wavered in his hand and the point dragged down. He lurched back a few paces as if shoved. Panic spread across his sweating face. Another unseen shove and Carston was retreating fast, fear growing.

Pierson gave a snort of laughter. "Won't be long now," he said. "Our man's been practicing." But his amusement died abruptly as a blue car swerved past his and skidded to a halt outside the farmhouse. The windshield of the car reflected the glare of the westering sun, and it wasn't possible to see anyone inside. "Shit! It's the Stone woman. Get back into the barn, now!" He pushed away from Gervais, his hands slipped inside his coat and came out with the gun in his left, a sword in his right.

"You as well?" Gervais yelled. "Are you all insane?"

"Almost certainly." Pierson's smile wasn't pleasant. "Fuck it, I don't do the hero bit! Gervais, I'll distract her, you work your way round the back of the barn and get Grand-mère out of here." He managed a single limping step between Gervais and the car, and a shot echoed around the yard. Pierson fell back into Gervais, and they both went sprawling.
Stone had fired through the windshield, Gervais realized, rather than make herself a target, and MacLeod had lost another lover to senseless violence.

Even as the realisation and sorrow hit him, Gervais saw MacLeod jerk around and start towards them, off-balance and distracted by both the shot and Pierson's fall. Carston lunged for him, sword thrusting. MacLeod whirled, the billhook crashed across the longer blade, hammered it down, and the bright metal shattered. Carston lurched forward with a bellow of outrage. The billhook swung again. The hook caught Carston's shoulder and wrenching him to his knees.

MacLeod didn’t hesitate. The heavy tool swept up, then down, striking home with a meaty impact. Pierson's slack body clutched tight to his chest, Gervais lay there and watched in appalled shock as Carston's head bounced and rolled across the hard-packed dirt. MacLeod stepped over the twitching body, his eyes on the car. Then stopped in his tracks, head thrown back.

A wind came from nowhere, swirling around the yard. A pale mist, riven with lightnings, spiraled out from the body and curled its filaments around him. The lightnings speared him, belly and back and out-flung arms. He howled in agony, spine arching. Crucified by light, he hung there as the energy struck through him time and again, finally releasing him to crumple to the ground.

Stunned by the uncanny horror of it, Gervais couldn’t move. Not even when the car door opened and a woman got out, a rifle in her hands. She raised it to her shoulder. MacLeod staggered to his feet and she pulled the trigger, dropping him where he stood. Then she turned to Gervais. Pinned on his back by Pierson's weight, movement was difficult. Attack or escape impossible.

Emotions roiled through him, fury, grief and fear, and the stupid inconsequential irritation that Jean-Michel was right. She was working for Carston. Instinctively his arms tightened around Pierson, as if he could somehow protect him from more harm. But blood was soaking into his clothes, cooling on his skin and Duncan had lost Adam within days of finding him. No one deserved that, least of all--

"Good afternoon, dear," she said in English. She was standing no more than three yards away. "You must be Gervais Dubosc." She lowered the rifle, held it one-handed, still pointing at him. "Stand up."

Carefully Gervais eased out from under Pierson's body, and cradled him to the ground. The man's head lolled, dark hair tangled over his forehead, eyes half-closed, mouth parted a little as if he was about to speak, and he was unarguably dead. A part of Gervais hoped that MacLeod was dead as well so that the man wouldn't have to live with this loss. He knelt beside the body and straightened the long limbs, his eyes on the weapons that had fallen from Pierson's slack hands. Could he snatch the gun and fire it before she could get off a shot at him, and regretfully decided he couldn't. It was just that bit too far away. He felt numb, distant from it all. *This is not real...*

"Stand up," she said again, impatience in her voice. "Do you speak English?"

Gervais looked up, but not at her. MacLeod lay on his face, long hair spilled, its gloss dulled by dust. One arm was stretched towards Pierson, the fingers clawed into the dirt of the yard as if he would hold back death itself.

"Up!" This time he obeyed her, a grim determination settling into his gut. Just one chance, that was all he prayed for.

"Good," she said, backing away from him toward the car. She reached into it and brought out a couple of knives, tossed them at his feet. They were ordinary kitchen knives with blades about six inches long, new, still in their plastic and card packaging. "That was a quickening," she said,
switching to accented schoolroom-careful French. "Spectacular, yes? But they always look rather uncomfortable, I think. Please take out the knives and put them into their hearts. We don't want them waking up just yet. Amanda isn't here." Gervais gaped at her, speechless. "Now, don't be foolish, dear. I haven't got all day. I don't want to have to shoot poor Adam again. Or you. Oh, look, the bullet went right through him and clipped you. Heavens, you were lucky."

He glanced down at himself, but the only blood on him was Pierson's. Then he saw the ragged tear in his jacket, high on his side, but not quite close enough to wound. "You are mad," he said with conviction, amazed that his voice didn't shake.

"Yes, dear. Do get a move on. Adam is dead, you know. He won't feel a thing, and I'm beginning to run out of patience."

The sheer insane grotesqueness of it almost broke him. "Why?" he demanded, a shake in his voice.

"Joseph will explain. It's all his fault, you know. He's the one you have to blame. The knives, Gervais."

He ripped the cursed things out of their packagings, and crouched at Pierson's side. Blood was a scarlet explosion in the centre of his chest. He must have been killed instantly. Just like Theroux. "Why? He's already dead! This is--blasphemy!"

"No, dear, of course it isn't. There are those, you know, who think poor Adam and Duncan are the blasphemies. But they're just plain ignorant. Do it."

"No," he said, standing up. "To hell with you."

At his feet, Pierson gave an impossible crowing gasp. At once she triggered off a shot that slammed into his chest, turned and sent another into MacLeod's body.

"Your last chance, my dear. Do it, or you'll join them, only you won't wake up. Or will he? What do you think, Joseph?"

"That you need putting down like a rabid dog," snarled a harsh voice from inside the car. He spoke in American-accented French, and had to be Joe Dawson. Her hostage. At least he was still alive. "Do it, son! Mac won't appreciate you dying on his account."

Stomach heaving, Gervais obeyed. He pushed the first knife home under Pierson's ribs, and retched, his mouth flooded with bile. He'd helped his grandparents butcher pigs, but this was so very different.

"Good boy. Now Duncan, if you please."

Gervais did as he was told, fighting the nausea, promising himself he'd do his damnedest to give her a taste of the same medicine. This isn't real! Isn't real! He turned MacLeod over and forced the knife through his shattered sternum, feeling the thin blade grate on bone, and sat back, shuddering.

"Well done. Now pull Adam over to Duncan so that Joe can see both of them together. I wouldn't want him to miss anything." But he lifted him instead, sliding his arms under Pierson's knees and shoulders. "Good, just be sure you don't loosen the knife," she added as he carried the limp body to lie beside MacLeod's corpse. "Perfect. Now come here."

Warily he approached her, hungry for that chance--just one chance--to turn the tables and he'd kill her with his bare hands. She must have read his expression, if not his mind, because she climbed back into the car. "Stop," she said. "Those wide shoulders will make a good shield if Amanda
becomes suspicious enough to try for a long shot of her own. I know Duncan doesn't like killing us, but she is a bit of an unknown quantity sometimes."

"You better believe it, bitch," a woman called behind him. "Give the gun to Joe and get out of here." Gervais took a swift glance over his shoulder and saw a woman, tall and beautiful, striding toward them with a revolver held in a rock-steady two-handed grip.

"Amanda!" Stone caroled happily. "I am so glad you're here at last. I was beginning to wonder if you were lost on these awful back roads. You're being just a little hasty, you know. Are you certain you can kill me before I kill Joseph? Tell her, Gervais, you're close enough to see."

He peered into the car. "The mad cow has jammed the rifle barrel against his belly," he said loudly. "If she pulls the trigger, she'll blow his spine out."

"Your call, Joe," Amanda said.

Dawson didn't hesitate. "Shoot her," he said calmly. But Amanda did hesitate. The gun in her hands wavered just a fraction and Stone laughed. She lifted her free hand from her lap and it held a small automatic. She pulled the trigger and Gervais felt a punch on his left arm. Behind him, Amanda made a choking sound and collapsed as he spun on his heel to reach for her. At the same time pain flared in his arm and he realized he was bleeding. The bullet had gouged a furrow above his elbow before hitting its target.

"This is just too easy." Stone sighed. "Shooting fish in a barrel. Whatever happened to ruthless, Amanda, dear? Move back, Gervais."

He shuffled away a few steps, right hand clamped to his wound, unable to take his eyes off the dead woman. He was trapped in a living nightmare. Only the pain in his arm gave him an anchor on reality.

Stone slid out of the car and left the rifle leaning against the door, keeping the handgun trained on him. Then she produced another kitchen knife and tossed it toward him. "Please give Amanda the same treatment and lay her beside the other two." He obeyed, finding it no easier to do it for a third time. She glanced around while he did it, a small frown on her face. "Let's see. We have four immortals and no Watcher. I have Duncan's, Adam didn't have one the last time I checked, Jack's is around somewhere, no doubt reporting in his death and Duncan's return. But he doesn't count because he sticks to his Oath. Amanda's young Hal, however, does not. I watched him go into your apartment, Joseph," she continued, disapproving, "and I'm sure he took out the knife I'd left in Amanda. What ever happened to the Watchers' Oath? Don't the Watchers have any sense of duty these days?"

"She'd have given him the slip," Dawson said. "She does it all the time."

"You expect me to believe that?" she said scornfully. "Really, Joseph, I thought better of you." She raised her voice. "Please come out now, Hal. Or Gervais and Joseph both die, and they'll stay dead."

There was a long silence. Then a heavy-set figure walked out from behind the barn, came towards them across the yard, red hair flaming in the slanting sunlight. Rees Evans. Dear God, was he a part of this madness as well?

The man's path would take him close to the three bodies, but Stone held up her hand and he stopped short of them. "You are not Hal," she said. But she didn't sound that sure of it.
"Hal Goldstein called in sick," Evans said. "I'm in the area, so I was detailed to Watch Amanda."

"Then stay right there. I don't have to ask who you are, I recognise your voice. Rees, I'm disappointed in you. Gervais, go and join him."

Slowly Gervais trudged across the yard. They were too far from her for a charge-down, but there had to be a way out of this lunatic situation.

"I'll try to distract her," Evans murmured, lips barely moving. "First chance you get, take their knives out."

"What good will that do, for God's sake?" Gervais hissed, but Evans didn't answer. Didn't have to. Immortals, the mad cow had said. And Adam had made that impossible gasp for air--

Stone strolled towards them, detouring a little to examine Carston's broken sword. But then she saw Pierson's and smiled. "This is more appropriate," she said, and picked it up. It was obviously heavier than she'd expected. "Now, which one would you like first, Joseph? Adam? Amanda? I'm going to leave Duncan to last. I know he's your special one. So...." Over her shoulder, Gervais saw a short, stocky figure appear: Margot Dubosc, her rolling pin held like a battle-axe and a fiercely determined expression on her face. "Adam, Amanda, Amanda, Amanda.... Amanda, I think."

There was a fractional pause. It had obviously dawned on Stone that she couldn't hold a gun on the two men and swing a sword at the same time. Her decision was almost instantaneous and the weapon snapped up, sighted on one of them. At the same time Evans launched into action with a roar of fury.

Startled, she stepped back, firing as she did so. Evans didn't falter or slow down. Gervais dived for the knives jutting from MacLeod and Pierson, and ripped them out, convinced she had missed.

She hadn't, but 280 plus lbs of enraged loosehead prop travelling fast took a lot of stopping. A couple of 9mm bullets didn't even come close. He struck her like a battering ram, arms wrapped around her. He crashed to the ground, pinning her beneath him. Gun and sword flew from her hands and she screamed, tore and pummeled at his massive weight. Gervais ran toward them, but Margot was there before him.

As Stone groped for and found her gun, the rolling pin swung down, propelled by muscles that could lift bales, haul pig carcasses. Remorselessly deliberate, it slammed home with a distinct crunch. Melissa Stone was still.

"Grand-mère," Gervais said, and hugged her to him. Her eyes were closed, her lips moving in a soundless prayer, and she sagged in his embrace.

A lean, blood-streaked hand reached past him to touch the pulse in her throat. "She'll be okay," Pierson said, surprising a yell from him. "She's in shock. Get her into the kitchen."

"No," Margot said, clutching Gervais' arm. "I'm all right. The boy?"

Feeling as if reality had yet again been ripped out from under his feet, Gervais turned to see the other two re-animated corpses bent over Evans. MacLeod gently turned him face up. Blood masked Evans' features, covered his belly and thighs, and Gervais was certain that he, too, was dead.

"Scalp-wound and gut-shot," MacLeod said. He threw off his jacket, pulled his sweatshirt and t-shirt over his head and wadded them to Evans' stomach. "That one's still in him." Pierson edged Amanda aside and crouched in her place.
"Hey!" It was a furious bellow from inside the car. "Let me outta here!"

Amanda looked up, face ashen.

"For god's sake, 'Manda," MacLeod growled, "let Joe loose before his heart explodes and we have another corpse on our hands!"

She nodded as another angry yell came from inside the car, and ran to open the door and lean inside.

Gervais knelt at the foreign woman's side. Melissa Stone was quite dead. The indentation in her skull mute evidence of the strength of his grandmother's arm.

"Immortal?" he whispered, but MacLeod heard him.

"She isn't. Neither's Theroux. Or Carston, now."

"This is madness," Margot said, voice trembling. "Such madness! I don't believe what I have seen here!"

"Welcome to our world," Pierson murmured. "It does get better, I promise."

Then Evans' eyes opened, and he gazed up at them with a startled expression. "Joe?" he said thickly.

"He's fine," MacLeod said quietly. "We're going to get you to the hospital, and Joe's going to call in the clean-up crew. Though Carston's Watcher has probably already done it. Grand-mère," he went on, "we'll need towels for pressure pads, blankets to keep him warm."

"I'll get them," she said, and hurried towards the farmhouse.

"Immortal!" Gervais snapped. Amanda thrust past him and searched the dead woman's pockets until she found a small key, then was gone again. "What the fuck does that mean? You were dead! I pushed knives into your dead bodies!"

"It means what it says." MacLeod raised his head and met his eyes. The peat-brown gaze was clear and steady, the tanned skin glowed with life, and Gervais felt the warmth of the man's caring fold around him in a brother's embrace. "It's a long story," MacLeod added apologetically. "I'm sorry you had to learn about it this way."

"I'm sorry you had to learn about it, period," Pierson muttered.

"I'll explain," said another voice, as rich and velvet-rough as calvados. "Just give me a moment." A tall, white-haired and bearded man limped toward them, one hand on Amanda's shoulder for support. "Adam, I need your cell phone. Evans can't go to St. Julien, there'll be too many questions asked about his gunshot wounds. The Watchers take care of their own. I'm going to get an emergency chopper in here for him. They'll clean up the trash while they're at it."

"Joe," MacLeod said worriedly, and Dawson smiled at him.

"I'm holding up okay," he interrupted. "What's the body count? I heard shots out behind the barn."

"That was an arsehole called Theroux, late and unlamented of this parish," Pierson replied. "So it's a total of three. You can probably rig it so it looks as if he's buggered off with Carston, because if Carston was ready to risk challenging MacLeod so soon after the aborted illegals drop, he almost
certainly had his next persona all lined up. I'll bet you'll find he's already closed down his business and retired. Never mind that. Did Stone tell you what all this was about?"

Dawson's smile died and his face was drawn with pain. "Yes," he said. "She was Matt Hale's mistress. He was the Watcher who put you in Sanctuary, Mac. I shot him when he tried for you again. This was her idea of payback, killing the people I care about so's I'd suffer the way she did."

"The sick bitch!" Amanda spat. "I told you she was crazy!"

"Gervais," MacLeod said, frowning. "You've been hit as well. 'Manda, check him out."

"I'm checking."

Gervais found himself the focus of a beautiful woman's attention, a woman he'd knifed but she'd already been dead. "For God's sake," she muttered, fussing over him, "you're plastered in blood! How much of this is yours?"

"Not much, it's mostly Adam's. And yours, and Duncan's---" He broke off with a wince and a yelp as she started to remove his jacket. "She shot you and the bullet caught me on the way." On the periphery of his vision, Gervais was aware of Dawson standing on braced legs, talking fast into Pierson's cell phone. MacLeod and Pierson were bent over Evans, talking quietly, reassuringly, while pressing the blood-soaked sweater to the man's belly. Margot came back, carrying a couple of blankets and a bundle of white towels. Evans' face was nearly the same colour as the towels. Surely he was dying.

Gervais' gaze was drawn to MacLeod. The man's upper body was streaked with smeared blood, but beneath it the skin was sleek over muscle, whole, unblemished.

"This is impossible," he whispered.

"Hang in there," Amanda said quietly. "Joe will explain. Madame," she called over her shoulder, "do you have something I can use for bandages?"

Margot turned, and her hand flew to her mouth. "Gervais? Merciful God! I didn't realize--"

"It's only a graze, Grand-mere," he said quickly. "Hurts like hell, but I can move my fingers so nothing's broken."

"Okay," Dawson said, slipping the cell phone into his pocket. "The chopper's on its way. It'll be here in about half an hour, probably less. How's Evans holding up?"

"He's holding," Pierson said. "They better not be late."

Dawson's expression became grimmer. He was, Gervais noticed with alarm, almost as pale as the Welshman.

"M'sieur," he said. "Come inside and sit down, then you can explain."

"That sounds like a damn good idea." His smile was a poor attempt. "I think I better take a pill as well. And you need to be patched up."

"Perhaps you could make us some coffee, Madame," Amanda said gently, "while I see to Gervais and Joe talks."

"Coffee," Margot agreed, purpose straightening her spine. "Yes, of course."
Gervais kept his uninjured arm around his grandmother and led the way to the kitchen. Soon the reassuringly normal aroma of fresh coffee filled the warm air. Amanda fetched a first aid kit from her car, then went to work on him. She eased him out of his jacket and sweater and cleansed the wound with swift efficiency.

It burned like the Devil's touch, and provided a solid anchor to the bizarre tale Dawson told them, of immortals and swords and beheadings. Gervais found it hard to believe a word of it, and by her expression, so did Margot. Okay, the coming back from dead he had to believe, because he'd seen it, but the rest? That lightning--a quickening?--he hadn't imagined it, but the answers Dawson weren't enough.

"Nonsense," Margot snapped. "I haven't heard such a pack of absurdities for years!"

"I know." Dawson smiled. His colour was better now, with medication and coffee inside him. "But it's true, Madame."

"Pff!" She glared at Amanda as if she was personally responsible for the fantasy. "You expect me to believe--you don't grow old? You can't die? Utter nonsense! And as for your people," rounding on Dawson, "just Watching? Rubbish! If all you do is Watch and record--what a complete waste of time and effort! It's obscene!"

"But, Madame, think of all they know, all they've seen, all the knowledge they've gained over the centuries--"

"Pff!" Again the angry cat hiss, this time with her hand slamming on the table top. "If they know so much, why aren't they recording it themselves instead of this stupid headhunting? Why aren't you asking them, instead of following them like so many second-rate spies? Why are you and Duncan so close, if the immortals aren't supposed to know about the Watchers? And this Prize," she went on, sneering, "this Grail--all knowledge in one person--a fat lot of good that is! Knowledge is for all, not one!"

"But, Madame--" Amanda began, and was cut off with a glare.

"Don't 'but, Madame' me! How long have you lived, Mademoiselle? You look no older that Gervais' Madeleine!"

Amanda's reply was cut off by the unmistakable sound of a helicopter approaching, and Dawson struggled to his feet.

"Saved by the bell," he said. "I better go out and mediate. I don't suppose these guys are used to dealing with immortals face to face."

"You think there'll be trouble?" Gervais demanded. "Even though Duncan and Adam are doing their damnedest to keep Evans alive?" He pushed back from the table and stood up, aggressive and determined, ignoring the painful throbbing of his injured arm.

"I doubt it," Dawson said. "But it won't do any harm to make sure. When all this has died down, I'd like to talk with you both again, but there's one thing I have to ask. Don't speak of this to anyone. Not even your closest family."

"Ask or demand, M'sieur?" Margot challenged, eyes blazing. "The Watchers look after their own, you said. So do the Duboscs, and Duncan and Adam are ours! Don't forget it!"

"Ours," Gervais echoed. "To defend or avenge, it makes no difference."
Amanda laughed quietly, an affectionate, almost gentle sound in the tense silence. She stroked her fingertips across Gervais' cheek, leaving warmth tingling across his skin and a burgeoning in his groin. "Thank you," she whispered, for his ears alone. Then she turned for the door. "Better come out with it here and now, Joe," she said. "I won't cramp your style, I'll go and find this third body. I have a feeling the Watchers have just met their match," she added, slanting a sultry glance over her shoulder, and gliding out with swaying hips.

"Huh," Margot said. "That one's no better than she should be. So, M'sieur Dawson. What else do you have to say to us?"

"Well, Madame," Dawson said, "it's usual in these circumstances for those who've learned of immortals to become Watchers themselves."

"Spies for you, Watching our friends?" Gervais said scornfully. "No."

Dawson was silent, met his angry gaze without flinching, and a grimness settled in the man's expression. There was something unshakeable about him, as solid as bedrock, and in that moment, Dawson reminded him irresistibly of Yves.

Dawson nodded. "That's what I guessed you'd say," he said. "I have another proposition for you. MacLeod and Pierson will be watching each other's backs, but that isn't going to be enough. I don't know who'll be assigned to be their Watchers, and I'll have no influence over the choice. All I know is, it won't be me, for health and internal discipline reasons. If we're lucky, it'll be Rees Evans, but there's no guarantee he won't end up on a disciplinary charge as well over this. That could lock him into Research for the foreseeable future. Which means I'm going to be out of the loop as far as intelligence is concerned, other than the field reports on the database and they are--inadequate."

He paused for a moment, studying Gervais and Margot in turn, and Gervais found himself tense, poised as if waiting for a signal of some kind. Dawson's smile became wry, acknowledging his readiness, perhaps. Then the Watcher seemed to come to a decision. He stood straighter, a tall man, strongly built, braced on slightly spread legs. "We still don't know, and will probably never know, if Stone was entirely on her own or working with renegades within the organisation."

"We did our best to clean up our act, but the prejudices and paranoia are still around. So I'm thinking it's time I started a renegade group of my own. I'd like you to keep your eyes open, looking for people showing too much interest in Mac and Adam and the house, including ones who have this tattoo on their wrists." He held up his hand and pushed his sleeve back to display a strange circular design, "and I'd ask you to report to me and to Mac. There are very few immortals I trust, and these days, very few Watchers. What do you say?"

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"Madame?" Alice whispered, touching her hand with gentle fingers.

"I'm not asleep, dear," Dominique said. "What is it?"

"M'sieur MacLeod is here, with a friend. He's asking if you'll see him."

"Of course I will!" Dominique pushed herself up onto the pillows. "Stupid boy, as if I'd refuse! With a friend?"
"Yes, and he's almost as handsome as M'sieur." She giggled quietly, "He has Nurse Paton flustered as well."

"Oh, dear, poor Janet." Dominique chuckled. Then her smile faded. Perhaps there were problems-- That Man Carston-- Resolutely, Dominique sat up. "My chair, please, Alice." Good news or bad, or a social visit, she would not meet it in her bed.

MacLeod was smiling as he came into her living room, and Dominique felt a rush of relief. Not bad news, then. She studied his face as she always did, looking to see if his shadows had lessened, and found they were gone. In their place was a deep and abiding contentment. All his vitality, his innate joy in life, were there to the fore, no longer swamped by remembered grief, and she was so happy for him she thought her heart would burst.

"The Carston situation is wrapped up," he said. "He's disappeared and I doubt he'll be causing trouble in Normandy or Jersey again."

"Thank God for that," Dominique said fervently. "Duncan, are you sure?"

"One hundred percent. Ma Dame." He took her hand. "There's someone I'd like you to meet." Something lit up within him, and it illuminated his whole being. The last time she'd seen that kind of expression, it had been in Leon's eyes, and had shown every time he looked at her. "Someone very important to me. Adam Pierson."

Dominique heard the words at a distance. Her eyes were fastened on the man who stepped from behind MacLeod's broad shoulders to stand beside him.

The same contentment lived in the hazel eyes, and Dominique understood immediately. It wasn't only the House of the Lanterns that had healed Duncan MacLeod. This man had played his own essential part. She was, she suddenly realized, being offered a rare trust. She reached out with her free hand and clasped the long narrow fingers that lifted to meet her.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered. "I am so very glad to meet you. Duncan has been alone for far too long."

"He never will be again, Ma Dame," he said. "Not while I live."

The End

Chapter End Notes

I wrote Phoenix Fire way back before 2005, and it was intended to be part of the Ignifer series. Unfortunately, Real Life intervened and in 2006, the sequel, Bale Fire, stalled at just over 74,000 words. There's an outside chance it might get finished, if anarchic politics on both sides of the Pond, pandemics, and my own physical health don't mess with my writing brain cell. Many thanks to those who've commented - Duncan/Methos are one of my few OTPs, and I loved writing them.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!